

News Release

No. 3136001 (Fort Belvoir hosts Partners in Flight conference)

By Adriane Miller

At the end of the millennium, birds don't seem to have much to sing about. About 10 percent of bird species in the United States today are federally listed as endangered or threatened, according to the American Bird Conservancy, an international nonprofit conservation organization. Since 1980, the counties surrounding Washington, D.C. have lost half of their forest cover, the Conservancy reports. And Bryan Watts, author of the "Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Plan," says the Mid-Atlantic states have lost half of the populations of some bird species.

Hoping to slow the rapid decline of birds and their habitats, natural resource managers from a four-state region plus the District of Columbia met earlier this year at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. They described common problems in monitoring and mapping birds, introduced new bird conservation efforts, and promised cooperative partnerships.

Fort Belvoir hosted the conference, "An Overview of the Partners In Flight Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Plan," at the installation's Officer's Club with the Department of Defense Partners in Flight, a program that manages migratory and resident landbirds and their habitats on DoD lands. Partners in Flight is a collaboration of groups including federal, state and local government agencies, as well as philanthropic, conservation, academic, and industry organizations. Its goal is to focus resources on monitoring, research, and education programs involving birds and their

habitats throughout the Western Hemisphere. About 60 people attended the Partners In Flight conference; among them, representatives from the U.S. Army Environmental Center, military installations, state and federal wildlife refuges, local and regional birding societies, local and state governments, citizens' groups, utility companies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Dorothy Keough, natural resources branch chief at Fort Belvoir, said such broad participation at the conference is encouraging, because success in conservation of bird species depends on more than one organization can do alone. "Actions should not stop at property boundaries," Keough said. "We realize a lot of different people have to participate, beyond the Department of Defense and land managers. We are working on a new Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan and want to make sure we incorporate bird conservation initiatives. But we have to reach out to other groups to work together on bird conservation."

Conservation for Practical and Philosophical Reasons

Peter Boice, director of conservation for the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Environmental Security, said monitoring bird populations is important for many reasons, pilot safety among them. Technologies such as weather radar help track large flocks of birds so pilots can avoid them.

"But philosophically, it's important to protect and enhance bird populations," Boice said. "I don't want my kids and grandkids saying, years from now, 'why didn't you do the best you could to protect these resources?'"

Boice said many efforts are underway to study and conserve migratory bird populations that travel each year from summer breeding grounds in North America to Latin and South America during the winter. One of DoD's key strategies, Boice said, is

to prioritize each installation's bird species and habitat needs in its Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan. Also, Partners in Flight has developed bird conservation plans for every physiographic area of the country. These plans are now being integrated into the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, which meshes the efforts of the major bird conservation initiatives, covering virtually all birds in all habitats throughout North America.

Chris Eberly, DoD Partners in Flight program manager, said DoD has both a major opportunity and a major responsibility in migratory bird conservation. "DoD has a lot of property along coast lines. That's good and bad," Eberly said. "There is a disproportionate number of endangered species that end up on installations, because in some areas that's the only habitat that is left. Through DoD's participation in Partners in Flight, conservation efforts with other federal and non-federal partners endeavor to avoid future listings of bird species due to habitat loss or other human causes."

Local Action, Global Results

Joe McCauley of the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture said major improvements have been made in habitat conservation. The Joint Venture is a partnership of 17 state natural resource agencies, plus federal agencies and nonprofit organizations. "Since 1988, we have protected 371,536 acres, have restored 88,050 acres, have enhanced 121,740 acres, and have contributed \$300 million and more to conservation efforts," McCauley said. "What we do for birds is going to have excellent benefits for other species. It is clear that a healthy ecosystem that supports a healthy population of birds also provides habitat for lots of other species."

He said the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Plan, the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan all offer good strategies. "Now the next step is delivering these plans on the ground," McCauley said.

“Everyone is an actual or potential partner. Whether you are member of a local society or a person who likes birds, you have a role to play in this revolution of bird conservation.”

But good intentions alone won't protect birds, said David Pashley, coordinator of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative. “Birds depend on healthy ecosystems,” he said. “Maintaining the dynamics of a system is a challenge, and birds need large areas for optimum health. A little postage stamp area of a healthy habitat is not a healthy system. You can't have a couple of bird pairs here and there and expect the avifauna to be protected.

“All conservation is ultimately local, done by local folks with local resources,” Pashley added. “But a local project is only effective if it is undertaken with the knowledge of ...the systems at a larger scale. In turn, regional initiatives must tie into national and continental scales. Regional planning is absolutely necessary and that's why we've done these [bird conservation] plans, to allow land managers and conservationists to understand the context in which their properties and holdings lie.”

Pashley echoed others at the conference who stressed cooperation. “No single landholder should be expected to bear the burden of providing the avifauna for a region,” he said. “We need to build the trust of people who own and manage land across the country and make them contributors to the conservation process, rather than combatants. A sense of partnership is a given. Without it, you're not going to go very far.

“By building a roof under which all these bird conservation initiatives can co-exist, by talking to landowners and conservationists with one voice, all of us can do a lot more together than we ever could have done alone.”

Sidebar:

Mid-Atlantic Plan Seeks to Protect Birds and Their Habitats

Maintaining a healthy ecosystem in the middle of explosive population growth is a monumental task. The Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Plan offers a place to start.

The Mid-Atlantic plan looks closely at problems facing migratory and resident birds, and presents recommendations for managing habitats to stabilize and increase populations of declining bird species. More than 180 species breed regularly in the region, an area covering roughly 56,220 square kilometers from southern New Jersey to southeastern Virginia. Birds here occupy habitats ranging from upland forests to salt marshes. Partners in Flight considers as many as 80 of the region's species—over 40 percent—to be “priority species of conservation concern.”

Partners in Flight identified, monitored, and measured all bird species and bird habitats in the Mid-Atlantic region, then developed population and habitat objectives based on that research.

Bryan Watts of the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia authored the plan. “The main agent of change is human population,” says Watts. But, he adds, the impacts of an expanding human population on regional bird populations extend beyond direct loss of habitat. Increased demand for recreational activity has led people deeper into remote areas that often represent the only breeding locations left for species that are sensitive to human disturbance. Fire suppression programs have changed the structure of forested habitats. Invasive plant species threaten the health of plants on which birds depend. Predators, especially cats, are present in historically high numbers.

“Despite these important management challenges, the potential for successful conservation of priority bird populations remains optimistic,” Watts writes in the plan.

“This optimism stems from the fact that a large number of lands critical to priority bird populations are currently protected or held by Partners in Flight partners, and many priority species remain relatively abundant and widespread within the region.”

For more information about the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain Bird Conservation Plan, visit www.PartnersInFlight.org, or www.dodpif.org. Or, contact Bryan Watts at 757-221-2247, bdwatt@mail.wm.edu; or Chris Eberly at 540-253-5675, ceberly@dodpif.org.

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