

THE ROLE OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE IN MANAGING NONGAME BIRDS

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Abstract.--The Fish and Wildlife Service is mandated to protect and maintain all migratory bird populations in the United States through a series of laws and treaties described. This paper discusses the five major goals of the Service's Migratory Bird Program and the strategies to achieve them for migrating nongame birds.

SERVICE ROLE

The Fish and Wildlife Service was established in the U.S. Department of Interior to "Provide the federal leadership to conserve, protect and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitat for the continuing benefit of people." (United States House of Representatives Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. 1977.)

Management of migratory birds therefore is one of the concerns of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Migratory birds are defined as those species which move seasonally from one place to another then return, and those that are included in the terms of international conventions and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

The overall role of the management of nongame birds by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to conserve them as part of our natural environment and to provide the public with an appreciation and access to this valuable resource.

AUTHORITY FOR MANAGING NONGAME BIRDS

The Convention for the Protection of Migratory Birds signed August 16, 1916 (United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. 1977) between the United States and Great Britain (signing for Canada) protects any migratory bird listed in the Convention. It allows for the establishment of open hunting seasons for game birds, and provides protection for all nongame birds listed in that Convention. It prohibits the taking

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of nests or eggs except for scientific or propagation purposes.

Subsequent treaties pertaining to the conservation of migratory birds were closely patterned after the 1916 Convention. Such treaties were signed with Mexico in 1936 and Japan in 1972 (Bean 1977). In 1977, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through publication in the Federal Register clarified the conventions by publishing a list of species that are covered by the Migratory Bird Treaties (Greenwalt 1977). In 1978, a Convention with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Conservation of Migratory Birds and Their Environment was concluded.^{2/} This treaty allows consideration of both migratory birds and their habitats. A Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the western hemisphere was signed by the United States and 11 other American Republics in 1940. This treaty expresses the wish of governments to "protect and conserve their natural habitat representatives of all species in general of their native flora and fauna including migratory birds" and to protect regions and natural areas of scientific values, etc. The nations agreed to take certain actions to achieve these objectives including the adoption of "appropriate measures for the protection of migratory birds of economic or esthetic value or to prevent the threatened extinction of any given species."

^{2/} Convention with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Conservation of Migratory Birds and Their Environment. Signed at Moscow on November 19, 1976. Ratified by the U.S. Senate, July 12, 1978. Ratified instruments were signed and exchanged on October 13, 1978 in Washington, D.C.

GOALS AND POLICIES

The Migratory Bird Program supports and directs all Service action dealing with migratory birds except those declared endangered, threatened or birds causing agricultural damage or threatening human health and safety. The Office of Migratory Bird Management has the responsibility for overall guidance of national migratory nongame bird management.

When a migratory bird is identified as threatened or endangered, the responsibility for conducting research on the species, maintaining special habitat and managing the population, shifts to the Endangered Species Program. When birds have an adverse effect on agriculture or threaten human health and safety, research and management is assigned to the Animal Damage Control Program. Pesticide related questions on nongame birds are assigned to the Environmental Contaminants Evaluation Program.

Service land management activities for the benefit of migrating birds are a function of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The first National Wildlife Refuge, Pelican Island on the east coast of Florida, was established in 1903 to protect brown pelicans and egrets. The Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 authorized the acquisition of refuge lands for the conservation and protection of all kinds of wildlife. The Endangered Species Act of 1966 provided the first specific authority to establish refuges for protection of vanishing wildlife.

The Program Management Document of the Migratory Bird Program provides the foundation and goals for the management of all migratory birds.^{3/} The goals of the Migratory Bird Program are as follows:

1. Prevent any migratory bird species from becoming "Threatened."
2. Maintain migratory bird population levels, with optimum species diversity, consistent with availability of habitat and the demands of society.
3. Preserve and manage habitats that are necessary to achieve migratory bird population goals.
4. Achieve migration and distribution patterns that are most beneficial to both migratory birds and society.

5. Minimize losses of migratory birds to disease, predation, illegal kill, crippling and other adverse influences.

Detailed management plans are in the formative stages for specific groups of nongame migratory birds such as raptors, marine species and colonial nesting birds. These management plans deal with problems such as species in reduced numbers, strategies to preserve and manage habitat and methods that prevent losses of birds.

MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Strategies to achieve its goals provide us with major insight into the role the Service plays in managing nongame birds. First, to prevent migratory bird species from becoming threatened, researchers in the Service are devising means of identifying species that are decreasing in numbers. Specific management strategies are being developed to halt and reverse the downward trends of species approaching the threatened status. These efforts include habitat preservation, habitat enhancement, land acquisition, disease control and public education.

The Service is presently adding to current knowledge on the population status of nongame species. This is part of the strategy to achieve the second goal of the Migratory Bird Program, to maintain migratory bird population levels, with optimum species diversity, consistent with the availability of habitat and the demands of society. The Breeding Bird Survey, which is conducted annually by the Service with the assistance of many volunteers, is being evaluated for validity in predicting the population trends of nongame birds. The Service is also planning to collect habitat data relative to the Survey in the near future. The feasibility of surveying groups of nongame birds not adequately sampled by current surveys (marine birds, shorebirds and raptors) is being investigated. These surveys need the assistance of State conservation agencies, bird clubs and universities in addition to the Service staff. The overall purpose of these surveys is to assure that we have knowledge about the population status of all nongame birds. Thus, we can institute action when appropriate to prevent species from becoming threatened or avoid adverse impact from birds on agriculture and human health and safety.

Research is also underway on habitat management practices. Examples include managing the prairie for nongame birds and determining the impact of transmission lines and habitat size on nongame bird populations.

^{3/} U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1977. Migratory bird management documents. (draft). Washington, D.C. 40 pages.

To fulfill the third goal, the habitat requirements of migratory birds in different communities will be determined. A National Wetland Inventory Survey will include migratory bird habitat. Unique or special habitats will be identified for wildlife including migratory birds. Key habitat with a major portion of a nongame bird population will be determined. Threats to these habitats will be identified and mechanisms developed to offset or reduce such threats.

To achieve the migration and distribution patterns most beneficial to the migratory birds and to society, the fourth goal, land modifications, land use and the destruction of migratory bird habitat that are by-products of human activities, will be discouraged. The Service will work with other conservation agencies and organizations to identify poor quality habitats where nongame birds occur in reduced numbers and recommend action to alleviate such distributional problems. It will encourage habitat enhancement programs to improve distribution of nongame birds especially on the wintering grounds.

The last goal, to minimize unnecessary losses, will be achieved by identifying those factors causing declines in migratory bird populations. Analysis will include disease, predation, interspecific competition, habitat changes, as well as human-caused mortality factors such as towers, transmission lines, glass reflection and biocides. After problems have been identified, national action plans will be developed to minimize such losses for species or habitats warranting special attention. The Service is improving its response to diagnose diseases in migratory birds and to institute disease control and prevention measures when needed.

The Service cannot dictate what form of migratory bird management should occur on private lands. It does, however, have the responsibility of providing leadership in the wildlife conservation field. Thus, the Service is preparing management criteria for different nongame bird communities. Research is now underway on disturbances to coastal migratory bird habitat, changes occurring in prairie communities, and habitat alteration due to strip mining. Nongame bird management guidelines developed for such habitat can be used by land managing agencies and landowners to effectively manage for nongame birds.

These goals will be accomplished through joint efforts of the local agencies, States, foreign governments, private conservation agencies, university programs and most important, the general public. Effective management of nongame birds can only occur through such cooperative and educational efforts.

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