Atlantic Coast Joint Venture News

Partners working together for the conservation of native bird species in the Atlantic Flyway region of the United States.

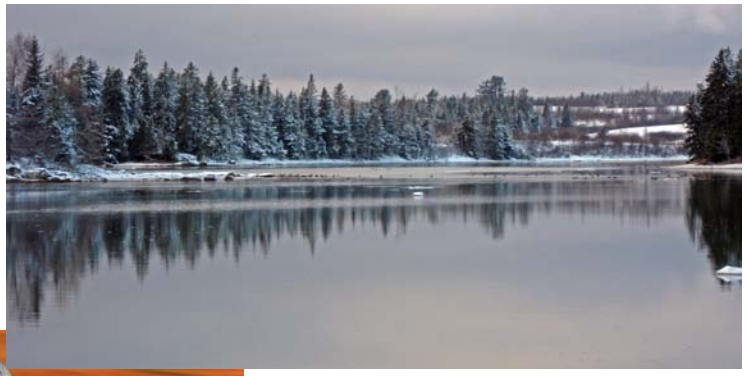
Photograph courtesy of Bill Majoros

Winter 2009 Volume 6, Number 1

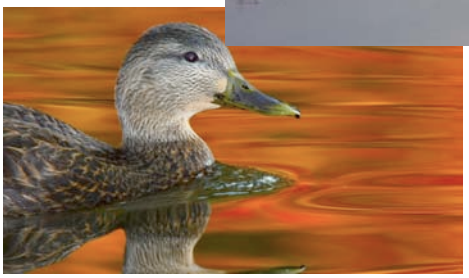
Nine Coastal Wetlands Grants Awarded in the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in December 2008, awarded more than $7.48 million in National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grants to nine projects in six states in the Atlantic Flyway: Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Maine, New Jersey, and Virginia. State resource agencies and other project partners contributed over $8 million in matching funds for the federal grants, to conserve, restore, and protect over 4,817 acres of coastal wetlands.

View Coastal Grant summaries.



Mason Bay coastal grant supports wintering Black Duck at the mouth of White Creek. Photo courtesy of Pleasant River Wildlife Foundation



Black Duck. Photo courtesy of Bill Majoros

Nine Additional North American Wetland Conservation Act Grants Recommended for Approval in ACJV

The North American Wetlands Conservation Council, in December 2008, recommended funding ten additional ACJV project in nine states. Projects in Florida, Georgia, Maine, New York, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, and Virginia will receive nearly $9.5 million in grant funds to be matched by $34.5 million in partner funds. Over 45,000 acres will be protected, restored, or enhanced. These projects along with the nine projects approved in September, 2008 would result in the conservation of 77,340 acres of significant wetland, riverine and upland habitat for priority migratory birds.

View recommended projects.

The Rayonier-Murff Tract Habitat Conservation Project, part of the Altamaha River corridor (above, USFWS photo), will protect habtiat used by the Prothonotory Warbler. Photo courtesy of Bill Majoros

Learn more about the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture

Francis Beidler Forest: Protecting and Enhancing an Old Growth Forest in South Carolina's Four Holes Swamp

Prothonotary Warbler. USFWS photo

Grant Proposal Deadlines:

North American Wetlands Conservation Act
Standard Grants
March 6 and July 31, 2009,

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Deadlines Vary
Check Website

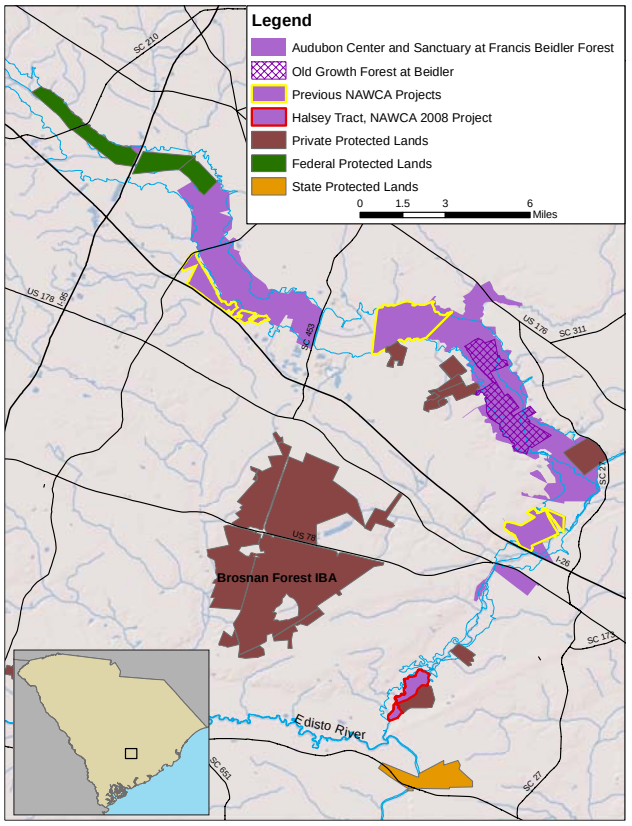
Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act
November, 2009

North American Wetlands Conservation Act Small Grants
October 29, 2009

National Coastal Wetland Conservation Grants
June 26, 2009

American alligator's are also found in the Biedler Forest area. USFWS photo

In the heart of South Carolina's Four Holes Swamp sub-basin of the Edisto River is a forested wetland treasure of state, national, hemispheric and global significance, Audubon's 15,590-acre Francis Beidler Forest (Beidler Forest). This Audubon Center and Sanctuary was established in 1969 through the acquisition of 3,415 acres and opened to the public in 1977. Since then, strategic collaborations with a mix of state, federal and private partners, combined with a diverse set of funding sources and a landowner base interested in conservation have lead to the dramatic expansion of protected lands.



In May of 2008, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) added Beidler Forest to the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. Adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides a framework for international cooperation for conservation of globally significant wetlands. Beidler Forest is the 23rd Ramsar Site in the United States, the only one in South Carolina and the single privately owned and managed site in the world. The gem of the Sanctuary is an 1,800-acre tract of old growth blackwater, bald cypress/tupelo gum forest, with many cypress trees over 1,000 years in age. It is the largest and best example of this forest type remaining on Earth. Water flows through and wildlife thrives in a flood plain that remains neither managed nor altered by modern human activities.

Beidler Forest is an Important Bird Area, as designated by the American Bird Conservancy and National Audubon Society, providing habitat for over 140 species of birds including 38 species of breeding neotropicals. Songbird nesting in the Beidler Forest is some of the densest in the country. Thirty years of Breeding Bird Census data confirm that Beidler supports six to seven pairs of nesting songbirds per acre. The neotropical species in most need of conservation within the Coastal Plain, in decreasing order of vulnerability, include Swallow-tailed Kite, coastal populations of Black-throated Green Warbler, Swainson's Warbler, and Prothonotary Warbler. The protection and restoration of remnant bottomland forests are critical for these species, all of which utilize Beidler. There are at least 35 plant and animal species found in the forest that are considered threatened or endangered. Beidler also supports 9 species of salamanders, 16 frogs and toads, 9 turtles, 8 lizards, 20 snakes and the American alligator.

Halsey Tract Wetlands. Photo courtesy of Mike Dawson

Open Space Institute Launches Two New England Initiatives

The Open Space Institute (OSI) has two new conservation initiatives in New England - Saving New England's Wildlife and the Western Massachusetts Land Protection Fund - to land trusts, funders, and agency partners across the region. Click on the links to each fund to see background information about each effort, as well as grant applications and supporting materials.

Over the next two years, the $25 million Saving New England's Wildlife program - capitalized with $5 million from a major foundation - will fund 10 to 15 transformative projects that accelerate the conservation of high priority wildlife habitat in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Funding from USFWS North America Wetlands Conservation Act has been critical in advancing Audubon South Carolina's conservation vision for Four Holes Swamp and has furthered the goals of the South Atlantic Coastal Plain in the South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative (SAMBI), including protecting habitats in large enough patches to sustain priority species, reconnecting fragmented habitats, restoring habitats that have been lost or converted, and enhancing the function and structure of habitats that have been degraded. The project is located in the headwaters of the Ashepoo-Combahee-Edisto (ACE) Basin in the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture focus area.

In October of 2008, Audubon received a third grant from NAWCA as part of a multi-year project to protect and restore freshwater, forested and estuarine wetlands, and adjacent uplands in the Edisto River corridor. This grant enabled Audubon to purchase 410 acres of the 788-acre Halsey Tract, which had been targeted for acquisition because of its vulnerability to development and its key characteristic of 2.9 miles of bottomland hardwood swamp frontage along a main channel of Four Holes Swamp, near its confluence with the Edisto River. The Halsey Tract follows the 2005 and 2003 NAWCA projects which added 2,384 and 887 acres to Beidler Forest, respectively.

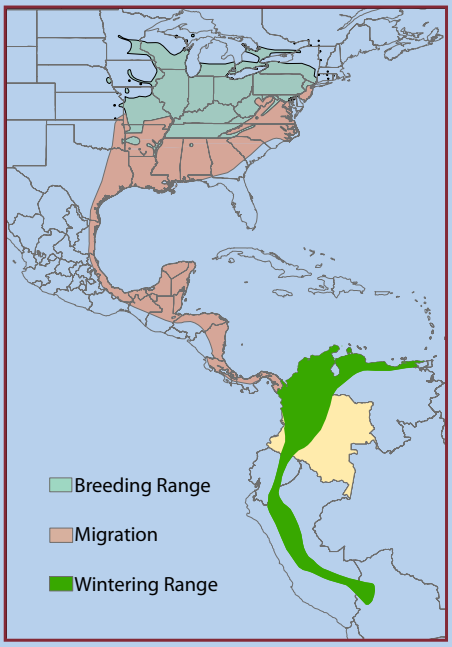
The acquisition of the Halsey Tract was leveraged with the protection of 10 additional tracts totaling 3,118 acres, including 956 acres of wetlands and 2,162 acres of valuable upland, which benefit breeding, migrating, and wintering birds in South Carolina. The Lowcountry Open Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy protected freshwater wetlands, saltmarsh and associated uplands on ten tracts most of which were contiguous to existing protected lands on Wadmalaw and Edisto Islands, expanding riparian corridors of protected habitat especially along Bohicket and Church Creeks in the Wadmalaw Sound.

It is the overall objective of Audubon South Carolina to create the largest possible tract of forest interior habitat at Beidler Forest, to treat it as the core of a very large wetland reserve, and surround it with lands owned by others that are managed in concert with the objectives of the reserve. The concept is one of a multi-owner bio-reserve, built around a permanently protected core. The lands adjacent to existing and potential Sanctuary holdings provide habitat components that add species, habitat redundancy, and structural and functional diversity to habitat components owned by Audubon and its conservation partners.

Recognizing that Audubon can't own all of the habitat critical to the protection of Beidler Forest, planners at Audubon believe that an educated and motivated neighbor constituency is the next best thing. The goal is to educate neighbors to the full range of values their lands possess and voluntary conservation strategies that promote private ownership through perpetual conservation easements. Audubon has worked with Lowcountry Open Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and others to permanently protect over 20,000 acres of private lands that are adjacent to or within one mile of Beidler Forest.

The opportunity exists to expand the protected area of Beidler Forest to over 30,000 acres of contiguous habitat in the Four Holes Swamp watershed. It is likely that on-going conservation activities could result in more than 20 miles of contiguous Four Holes Swamp habitat being protected, the connection of two Important Bird Areas, (Brosnan Forest and Beidler Forest) and protection of other major and minor tributaries of Four Holes Swamp and the Edisto River.

Spruce Grouse. Photo courtesy of Eric Dresser



Range map for the Cerulean Warbler.

A parade with children dressed as Cerulean and Golden-winged Warblers is an example of education programs to raise awerness of migratory bird conservation issues in the Andean region of Columbia. USFWS photo

Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse Published

After more than three years of work, scientists have published the Continental Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse, reports the Wildlife Management Institute. The plan resulted from a collaboration of spruce grouse researchers and managers, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Resident Game Bird Working Group, Wildlife Management Institute, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Spruce grouse occupy forests dominated by short-needled conifers ranging from Alaska to Labrador and south into New England, the Upper Great Lakes states and the northern states of the western United States. Although widely distributed and secure through much of its range, spruce grouse are declining or rare along the southern fringe, particularly in the East. The species' status varies by jurisdiction - it is a game bird in some and a listed species in New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

View Continental Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse.

Cerulean Warbler and Golden-winged Warbler Working Groups Meet for a Bird Conservation Conference in South America

A joint meeting of the Cerulean Warbler Technical Group and Golden-winged Warbler Working Groups was held in Bogota, Colombia, during the week of October 20-24, 2008. Thirty representatives from North American conservation agencies and organizations followed the migratory paths of these birds to join 55 other participants from Central and South American countries for this historic conference. The conference focused on developing plans for implementing critical conservation actions for these birds during the non-breeding season, with an emphasis on promoting a model of international cooperation and mutual partnership between industries, landowners, and conservationists. The conference was held at the headquarters of the National Federation of Colombian Coffee Growers, which proved to be very helpful in engaging the coffee industry in discussing possibilities for increasing the amount of shade coffee production as well as protecting remaining blocks of native forest. Both native forest and shade coffee plantations are used by a wide variety of resident and migratory birds, and increasing the amounts of these habitats is seen as a critical conservation action. The Colombian Coffee Federation was also willing to discuss the development of a partnership with the coal industry in North America to promote habitat conservation for migratory birds, especially Cerulean and Golden-winged Warblers, on both their breeding and wintering grounds. The conference also helped highlight opportunities for education and outreach activities to communicate awareness of non-breeding season conservation in Central and South America and to promote linkages between countries in the western hemisphere. It is clear that support from North American organizations for conservation activities in Latin America can have an extremely beneficial impact. A field trip to coffee and cacao plantations outside of Bogota was also arranged as part of the conference, where participants got to interact with local landowners/producers. The conference was a huge success in strengthening connections among people from across these birds' migratory ranges and laying the ground work for stronger industry partnerships in implementing conservation activities for these species. For more information, contact Randy Dettmers.

Cerulean Warbler. Photo courtesy of Robert Royce

Balsam fir-dominated forests are breeding grounds for Bicknell's Thrush. Photo courtesy of VCE

Upcoming meetings of the Joint Venture:

Winter Meetings

ACJV Waterfowl Technical Committee
February 22, 2009
Easton, Maryland

ACJV Integrated Bird Conservation Committee
February 24, 2009
Easton, Maryland

ACJV Management Board
Winter Meeting
March 3-4, 2009
via teleconference

Summer Meetings

ACJV Waterfowl Technical Committee
July 21, 2009
Location TBA

ACJV Integrated Bird Conservation Committee
July 21, 2009
Location TBA

ACJV Management Board
Summer Meeting
July 24, 2009
Location TBA

The Winter 2008 issue of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Science Support Team newsletter "Venturing Forward" is now available.

Bicknell's Thrush Conservation Planning Moves Forward

Bicknell's Thrush. Photo courtesy of T.B. Ryder

The International Bicknell's Thrush Conservation Group (IBTCG) held a meeting on October 29-30, 2008 to review an initial draft of its Bicknell's Thrush Conservation Action Plan and begin work on specific implementation strategies for high priority conservation actions. Biologists and land managers from New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia participated in the meeting.

As part of this planning effort, the IBTCG has identified an initial population goal of increasing the global population of Bicknell's Thrush by 50% over the next 50 years. As the initial steps toward achieving this goal, high priority conservation actions for the next 3-5 years are identified in the Conservation Action Plan, separated into Breeding/Migration and Wintering Grounds activities.

Actions for the Breeding and Migration periods include:

- Increase research across elevation and latitudinal gradients to track effects of climate change
- Identify important migratory stopover sites, routes, and patterns
- Determine where calcium comes from in the diet to assess effect of acid deposition
- Measure the effects of forestry practices on the birds' abundance and fecundity
- Partner with timber companies to develop forest management guidelines
- Conduct a habitat supply analysis that incorporates forest management practices
- Monitor response to changes in habitat due to climate change, forest succession, and forest management
- Research site-specific responses of birds to industrial development pressures

Actions for the Wintering Grounds include:

- Identify where current deforestation is occurring on the wintering grounds
- Prioritize remaining forest for protection
- Expand resources and reach of Habitat Protection Fund (funds set up as a result of ski resort development)
- Research habitat selection and overwinter survival relative to local land use practices and habitat condition
- Enhance female survivorship through better protection and restoration of female-dominated habitats

Implementation strategies for these activities are being developed now, and a final version of the Conservation Action Plan is expected to be completed by the end of April 2009. If you have an interest in participating in the IBTCG or an interest in helping to address any of the high priority actions identified above, see the IBTCG website for more information on the group, the Conservation Action Plan, and contact information for chairs of the IBTCG and its subcommittees.

Birds on (Shrinking) Mountaintops

Winter Wren. USFWS photo

Blackpoll Warbler. Photo courtesy of Jeff Nadler, BSI.

Bicknell's Thrush. Photo courtesy of Steve Faccio

Wind turbines atop an Appalachian Mountain Ridge. USFWS photo

Boreal Forest. Image courtesy of BSI

One of the oldest ecological "laws" is that the number of species of plants and animals decreases as you move farther from the equator and higher in elevation. This is due to a combination of interacting factors, including colder climates, lower productivity, greater environmental severity, a history of glaciation (younger and thinner soils), a reduction of area available, and an increase in isolation. Mountaintop ecosystems have often been compared to "islands" of high-elevation conditions in a "sea" of lower-elevation habitat. Like oceanic islands, high-elevation forests have a relatively poor bird community. In New England and New York, high-elevation forests (3,000 – 4,000 feet elevation) are typically dominated by a relatively small suite of breeding birds, most commonly just these six species: White-throated Sparrow, Winter Wren, Slate-colored Junco, Blackpoll Warbler, Swainson's Thrush, and Bicknell's Thrush. Other species are possible, but much less common, including Boreal Chickadee and Gray Jay. However, forests occurring at lower elevations on these same mountains would typically have 20-30 bird species breeding in any 25-acre patch, including more than a dozen species of warblers and vireos, and several species of woodpeckers, flycatchers, and thrushes.

In the Northeastern U.S. and Appalachian Mountains, alpine forests face a variety of threats, including cell tower, windfarm, and recreational development, and habitat changes due to acid rain and climate change. Just as ocean islands may shrink due to rising sea levels, alpine habitat will likely shrink as the climate warms. This could have dire consequences for some highest-priority bird species, such as Bicknell's Thrush, which is restricted to the northeastern U.S. and nearby portions of Canada. Scientists at the Vermont Center for Ecostudies have shown that an increase in summer temperatures of 3 °C could enable upslope encroachment by temperature-limited hardwoods and reduce Bicknell's Thrush habitat in the north east by as much as 98%. Some of the "high-elevation species" mentioned above will probably be fine, regardless of climate changes. For example, Winter Wren and White-throated Sparrow are not only common on the tops of New England mountains, but also across much of Canada. The tiny Winter Wren is loved by many bird-watchers not for its plumage—which is the drabbest of browns—but for its remarkably long and vibrant song, which can be heard for great distances even in the densest of forests. This species is most common in old conifer forests, and is found across much of the Pacific coast (from California to the Aleutians of Alaska) as well as in eastern Boreal forests. Its strong association with coarse woody debris on the ground makes it ironically associated with both old-growth forests and recently-logged sites. This flexibility in habitat use convey a certain optimism about its long-term persistence even in a changing world, which is much harder to suggest for species like the Bicknell's Thrush. Link to the study.

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The Northeast Bird Monitoring Handbook

"The Northeast Bird Monitoring Handbook: Ten Steps to Successful Bird Conservation through Improved Monitoring" has recently been published by the Northeast Coordinated Bird Monitoring group. The handbook provides practical advice and ideas for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of bird monitoring. While the geographic focus of the handbook is the Northeastern US, the broader bird monitoring community was purposefully considered during its development. Variants of this handbook targeting other geographic areas may be produced in the future and we welcome discussions and collaborations to make that happen. An electronic version is available with the hope that it will be helpful when developing a bird monitoring program. Hardcopies are available for free on request. Download the handbook.

Arctic Goose Joint Venture Plan Update

The Arctic Goose Joint Venture (AGJV) was established in 1989 to further the scientific understanding and the management of North America's geese. The continent's geese include individuals from three genera (Anser, Chen, and Branta), seven species (White-fronted Goose, Emperor, Snow, Ross's, Brant, Cackling, and Canada Goose), and 34 recognized populations. Collectively, these populations constitute a natural resource of enormous social, economic, cultural, and recreational value to the people of Canada, the United States, Mexico, and beyond.

The AGJV Strategic Plan 2008 to 2012 is the 4th update and is a comprehensive compilation of management issues and strategies for 28 populations of North American geese. The Strategic Plan includes eight key focus areas:

- Habitat Degradation Caused by Populations of Snow and Ross's Geese;
- Population Status and Assessment of Midcontinent and Tule White Fronted Geese;
- Population Delineation and Population Assessment of Short Grass Prairie, Tall Grass Prairie, Lesser and Taverner's Geese;
- Assessing Impacts of Climate Change and Resource Development on Arctic Geese;
- Population Status, Population Dynamics and Ecology of Brant and Emperor Geese;
- Status Assessment and Population Dynamics of Snow and Ross's Geese
- Population Specific Harvest Estimates; and
- Development/Improvement of Breeding Ground Surveys.

View the Arctic Goose Plan Update.

New Oil Spill Funds for NAWCA

An oil spill located at a tank farm on the Mystic River, upriver from Boston Harbor has resulted in a criminal fine payment by the ExxonMobil Corportation of $5,640,982 to the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) fund. This money will be used to restore, enhance, and protect wetlands and adjacent habitats in Massachusetts. This is the third oil spill criminal fine payment directed to NAWCA by the U.S. Attorneys Office in the District of Massachusetts as a result of the relationship between the ACJV, the USFWS Office of Law Enforcement, and the U.S. Attorney's office. View press release.