10 Frequently Asked Questions About *The State of the Birds* Report

1. In general, are things getting better or worse for birds in the United States?

The 2014 report provides both encouraging and discouraging findings. The report finds bird populations declining across several key habitats and includes a Watch List of bird species in need of immediate conservation help. The report also reveals, however, that in areas where a strong conservation investment has been made—wetland birds, for example—bird populations are recovering and growing.

2. **What birds are worse off, better off?**

Birds in aridland habitat show the steepest population declines in the nation. There has been a 46 percent loss in the population of these birds since 1968. Habitat loss, hydrological alteration, overgrazing and conversion to agriculture are the largest threats. These are also significant threats in the nation's grasslands, where the report notes a decline in breeding birds, such as the eastern meadowlark and the bobolink, of nearly 40 percent since 1968. That decline, however, appears to have leveled off since 1990—a result, the authors say, of the significant investments made in grassland bird conservation.

In addition, introduced species have had a particularly strong impact on native island birds. In Hawaii, introduced animals such as mongoose, rats, domestic cats, pigs and goats have taken a huge toll on native species. One-third of all of America's federally endangered birds are Hawaiian species.

There are some encouraging signs for many species in grasslands, wetlands and several other key habitats that have benefited from targeted conservation efforts. In general, development is squeezing shorebirds and their habitat along the coasts. However, among the 49 coastal species examined, there has been a steady rise in populations of 28 percent since 1968. This may be a reflection of the establishment of 160 national coastal wildlife refuges and nearly 600,000 acres of national seashore in 10 states.

The creation and preservation of large swaths of forests through public-private partnerships in the Appalachian Mountains and the Northwest is believed to have helped declining forest-dependent species such as the golden-winged warbler and the oak titmouse. Efforts like this are essential, as forest-dependent birds have declined nearly 20 percent in the western U.S. and 32 percent in the east since 1968.

3. What are some of the bird species that warrant intensive conservation attention given the findings of the 2014 report?

Declining species include:
Palila—one of many unique Hawaiian forest birds that continue to decline and are perilously close to extinction. These birds require immediate strong conservation actions to protect and restore native forest habitats by fencing and eradicating non-native ungulates such as non-native mouflon sheep and controlling introduced predators such as feral cats and mongoose.

Hudsonian godwit—among the steepest declining (-6.2 percent per year since 1974) of a large suite of declining, long-distance migrant shorebirds. The species is threatened primarily by disturbance and loss of highly localized wintering sites along the South American coasts, aquaculture (e.g., shrimp farming) and coastal development, as well as disturbance and loss of spring stopover habitat in the Gulf-coastal and midwestern prairies.

Cerulean warbler—declining by 3 percent each year over 45 years; threatened by unsuitable structure and composition of mature deciduous forest, especially in the Appalachians; improper forest management; urban expansion; and loss of montane forests in the Andes due to rapid clearing for pasture and agriculture.

Chestnut-collared longspur—declining by more than 4 percent per year over 45 years; threatened by continued loss of native prairie grassland due to conversion to agriculture (crops). It is especially threatened in recent years by rapid loss of native grassland in the Chihuahuan Desert grassland region of northern Mexico due to unchecked and often illegal conversion to pivot-irrigation agriculture.

Bendire's thrasher—declining at 4.6 percent each year over 45 years; threatened by loss of desert scrub habitat due to urban expansion and conversion to agriculture, exacerbated by prolonged drought and increased temperatures related to climate change.

4. What are some of the notable success stories?

American Oystercatcher—U.S. coastal populations have increased 6 percent per year since 1974. Recent population increases and range expansion can be attributed to targeted conservation actions to protect breeding and roosting sites along the Atlantic Coast, supported by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and other partners.

Wood ducks, gadwall and ring-necked ducks are among the harvested waterfowl that have increased 2—3 percent per year over the past 45 years, as a direct result of wetland habitat management and restoration under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Kirtland's warbler is an endangered species that has responded positively to targeted conservation efforts under the Endangered Species Act; its population rebounded from a low of 167 males counted in 1974 to more than 2,000 in 2012, and the range is slowly expanding from its tiny core in Michigan to adjacent areas in Wisconsin and Ontario.

Bald eagle—recovering at a remarkable rate of 5.5 percent each year since the banning of pesticides such as DDT and the enactment of the Clean Water Act in 1972; they were removed from the U.S. Endangered Species List in 2007. Other fish-eating birds such as osprey, brown pelican, double-crested cormorant and northern gannet have enjoyed large population increases as well.

Wild turkey—increasing at one of the fastest rates of any North American bird (8 percent per year since 1966) in direct response to habitat management and reintroduction programs by state wildlife agencies and private hunting groups. The comeback of the wild turkey is considered one of the greatest conservation success stories in U.S. history.

5. Are there any new or emerging threats to birds?

Climate change is becoming increasingly important as a looming threat to birds. Sea-level rise affects breeding habitat for coastal birds, island birds and colonial seabirds. Warming temperatures in Hawaiian forests are allowing mosquitoes to move up into higher elevations, reducing the amount of habitat free of avian malaria. Warming ocean temperatures are also disrupting stocks of prey fish that seabirds rely on. An immediate threat is the drought in the West. This puts additional pressure on aridland birds that are already being affected by hydrological alteration, overgrazing and conversion to agriculture. More is being learned about anthropogenic mortality from recent studies that identify cats and collisions with buildings and automobiles as the leading human-caused sources of bird mortality.

6. How can federal and state governments better protect birds?

There are more than a dozen key governmental programs that deliver bird conservation results and some of their successes are reflected in this year's *The State of the Birds* report. Those programs require continued local and federal government support and funding and include the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Migratory Bird Joint Ventures, the Farm Bill (which contains several key conservation features) and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

7. Why should people be concerned with the overall state of birds?

Birds are vitally important indicators of ecosystem health. By examining population trends of species dependent on the seven habitats—grasslands, forests, wetlands, ocean, aridlands, islands and coasts—it can be better assessed how well or poorly those systems are operating and possible sources of problems and corrective actions can be better identified.

8. **What is *The State of the Birds* report and who creates it?**

   The State of the Birds report provides an extensive review of population data from long-term monitoring. This year's report is also a five-year check-in on population indicators presented in the inaugural 2009 State of the Birds report. *The State of the Birds 2014* report is authored by the U.S. Committee of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, a 23-member partnership of government agencies and organizations dedicated to advancing bird conservation.

9. **How can individual citizens help protect birds?**

   There are many actions that individuals can take to help birds in their area. For example: buying Duck Stamps, which help fund conservation work; buying Smithsonian Certified Organic Bird Friendly coffee; using organic half and half in coffee, as some data are showing very encouraging bird conservation findings associated with organic dairy farms; using fewer pesticides; creating more natural habitat in yards; keeping cats indoors and not letting dogs run free; and keeping feeders and water sources fresh. More tips are available on the American Bird Conservancy's website here and here.

   Those interested in more in-depth bird conservation activities might want to consider a host of citizen science opportunities, including:

   - The North American Breeding Bird Survey
   - The Christmas Bird Count – longest-running citizen science survey in the world
   - Project Puffin partnership
   - The citizen science program at Cornell Lab of Ornithology
   - USA-National Phenology Network: Nature's Notebook

10. **Does *The State of the Birds* report have any relationship to the National Audubon Society announcement occurring at the same time?**

    Audubon's birds and climate report looks at birds' sensitivity to climate change, which is an increasingly important dimension to consider in bird conservation. With two major reports about North America's birds coming out in the same week—one focused on the state of bird habitats today and one looking at how birds are being challenged by climate change—the plight of birds has been put front and center. We now have two powerful tools to help us understand where birds need our help, and we know that by working together we can create a better future for birds and for people.

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