



The Case for RMBO's Mission — Conserving Birds and Habitat

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) biologists got a stark reminder of the urgency of their mission when they returned for a second year of work in Valles Centrales in Chihuahua, Mexico. In 2007 they had completed a pilot project to monitor more than 30 species of birds that breed in the grasslands of the United States and Canada and winter in this part of Mexico. Upon returning the next year, the biologists found that the grassland habitat in 28 percent of their study area had been converted to croplands.

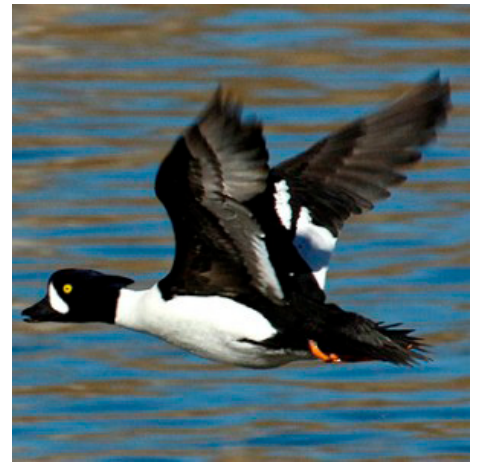
Bird populations are declining, severely in many cases, due to loss of habitat and unsustainable land-management practices. At least 130 bird species have gone extinct worldwide since 1500, and 1,227 (12%) are threatened with extinction. Reversing declines requires sound data, strategic habitat conservation, and a public that cares and is engaged in solutions. Maintaining a healthy environment is the responsibility of everyone — individuals, businesses and public decision-makers. RMBO's approach to bird conservation integrates science, stewardship and education and engages people in conservation on their land and in their communities.

Science...

How we manage land is critical in determining whether the pace of bird extinctions continues. Most public lands in the western U.S. are in the jurisdiction of state or federal agencies with mandates to manage resources, including birds, wisely for the benefit of the public. Faced with limited resources and competing demands from many interest groups, land managers need reliable information to make sound management decisions. RMBO scientists work with these agencies as well as private land managers to develop and implement cost-effective, integrated monitoring strategies to provide that information. Because bird population trends can reflect overall habitat health, land managers use our monitoring data to make decisions that support sustainable wildlife populations.

Stewardship...

Well-managed public lands alone cannot sustain healthy bird populations. Much of the grassland west of the Mississippi River is privately owned and is home to many rapidly declining bird species. RMBO's work with farmers and ranchers to integrate productivity with bird habitat management has enhanced more than 150,000 acres of agricultural lands through voluntary conservation programs. In Mexico, RMBO is working with partners to train biologists to monitor bird populations and engage land owners — approaches we pioneered in the prairies of the western U.S.



Why Birds?

Birds help us learn about ourselves.

The medical world believed that neurons in the brain could not be regrown once lost until biologists studying the neuroscience of birdsong discovered that new neurons can indeed be grown in the brain, unleashing a spate of new medical research.

Birds tell us about environmental health.

Birds are early indicators of changes in the environment, and trends in their populations help us understand what's going on. They occupy a broad range of habitats and often reflect the abundance and diversity of other organisms or warn us of unhealthy conditions. Birds play key roles in healthy ecosystems, such as seed dispersal and pollination.

Birds give us pleasure.

Birdwatching is one of the fastest growing pastimes in the country. From the serious life-lister to the backyard birder, millions of people find that birds make life more enjoyable. Birding activities are also important economic drivers in many areas.

Recognizing the connection between healthy human and wildlife communities, we form partnerships with agricultural producers. "You changed my life," says Russell Davis, a rancher in southeastern Colorado.

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Education...

Education is another vital piece for successful bird and habitat conservation. Through summer camps, field trips to our banding stations, school programs, workshops, nature clubs and teacher trainings, RMBO is introducing multiple generations to the world of birds. We connect people with nature and help them understand how their behaviors and decisions will determine what our natural world looks like in the future.

People & Priorities...

The support of members, donors and volunteers is essential to the success of RMBO's mission to conserve birds and habitats. Nearly 95 percent of our current funding comes from contracts and grants designated for specific projects. Increased private contributions will strengthen and broaden RMBO's capacity to set its own course, maximize the value of ongoing efforts and tackle pressing unfunded needs for bird conservation. Priorities include:

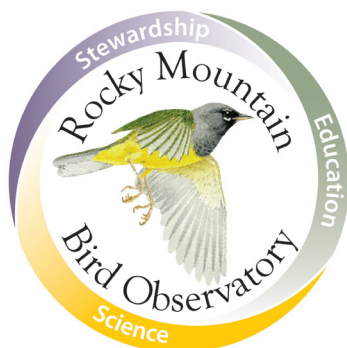
- a citizen science/volunteer coordinator;
- data analysis and publication;
- Black Swift and other priority species research;
- supplies, signage, trail expansion and scholarships for the environmental learning center;
- establishment of an endowment to reinforce long-term viability;
- support for unfunded/underfunded science, stewardship and education programs.

Our health and future and those of our native bird populations depend on a healthy environment. Economic issues are cyclical, but habitat and bird-population loss can be permanent. When budgetary cutbacks imperil conservation, other funding must replace it to avert irreparable damage. RMBO has a 20-year history of facing conservation challenges, but our biologists, environmental educators and land-management experts cannot do it alone. They require reliable support from people and entities who grasp the importance of our passion and commitment to conserve birds and their habitats.

"When do we get to see the ornithologist?" asks a lad at our bird banding station who came to see wild birds in the hand for the first time. "My son has a speech impediment, yet he can say 'ornithologist,'" says his young mother. Nature and the outdoors can inspire kids of all ages.



Photos: Front, Barrow's Goldeneye; back top, Northern Saw-whet Owl - both by Bill Schmoker; Back bottom, student using scope by Kacie Ehrenberger



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