

Promoting a Western Hemisphere Perspective

A Report to the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan Council - November 2001

In March 2001, the U. S. Shorebird Conservation Plan Council (Council) charged a committee to investigate the role that the Council might play in shorebird conservation throughout the Western Hemisphere. The committee (Brad Andres, Jim Corven, Garry Donaldson, Heather Johnson, and Carol Lively) met in July 2001 to address this task. The purpose of this document is to increase the awareness of challenges and opportunities for shorebird conservation throughout the Western Hemisphere that is consistent with the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan. As part of this document, the committee has drafted a set of action items for consideration by the Council.

I. Why is a Western Hemisphere perspective for shorebird conservation needed?

Shorebirds are one of the most migratory groups of animals on the planet. Of 51 species that breed in northern North America, substantial portions of the populations of 40 species (78%) spend the boreal winter in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Shorebirds breeding in northern North America can also be found wintering in eastern Asia, Australia, Polynesia, and northern Europe. In their wintering grounds, migrant shorebirds share habitats with numerous resident bird species and austral migrants. Clearly, an understanding of the relationships between shorebirds and their environments throughout their annual cycle is needed to develop effective conservation actions.

The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (USSCP) - and the Canadian Shorebird Conservation Plan - recognized the importance of a broad geographic perspective and generated a set of hemispheric goals and objectives. Adding a hemispheric context to local and regional projects enhances their utility. In fact, population objectives outlined in the Plan might only be achieved by simultaneous action across multiple portions of a species' range. By building broader geographic partnerships, duplicate efforts are reduced, and use of limited personnel, financial, and material resources is maximized.

II. An Overview of Geographically-linked Bird Conservation Programs

The importance of broad geographic approaches to migratory bird conservation has long been recognized in North America. In 1916, the U.S.A. entered into a convention with Great Britain (acting for Canada) that called for cooperative management of migratory birds across national borders; a similar bilateral treaty was developed with Mexico in 1936. The Western Hemisphere Convention was adopted in 1940 to promote the protection of migratory birds of economic or aesthetic value throughout the Americas. As these conventions were being negotiated, waterfowl began to be managed along longitudinal flyways focusing exclusively on the U. S. This approach necessarily required increased international cooperation. Conventions for the conservation of migratory birds were extended to Japan (1972) and the Soviet Union (1976; currently administered by the Russian Federation).

The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) was initiated in 1986. The purpose of the WHSRN program was to identify important shorebird habitats and to provide a network of people concerned about shorebird and wetland conservation from southern South America to the Arctic. The Pan-American Shorebird Project was developed to increase collaboration among shorebird biologists in the Western Hemisphere by coordinating shorebird color marking in the Americas and connecting observers of marked shorebirds with the banders of those birds. Flyway strategies for the conservation of migratory waterbirds have also been developed in the African-Eurasian and Asia-Pacific regions.

Concurrent with development of WHSRN was the initiation of the habitat-based North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). The NAWMP conservation blueprint, described as scientifically-based, landscape-oriented, and partnership-based, was borrowed to develop the current USSCP (and also the Partners in Flight and North American Waterbird conservation plans). National shorebird plans form an integral part of the emerging North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). Among the operating principles of NABCI is that bird conservation must be addressed internationally and linkages with other countries should be encouraged.

Several projects are illustrative of efforts that address shorebird conservation throughout the flyways. The Shorebird Sister Schools Program was created to further education about shorebirds and wetlands throughout the Western Hemisphere and the Asia-Pacific region. The *Arctic-nesting Shorebirds* curriculum associated with this program is available in four languages. Studies of the Red Knot are being simultaneously conducted in Argentina, Brazil, the U.S.A., and Canada. A network of shorebird enthusiasts has been formed to share information on the biology and conservation of Western Sandpipers along the American Pacific Coast. Groups from Chaplin Lake in Saskatchewan, Great Salt Lake in Utah, and Marismas Nacionales in Nayarit have formed a tri-national effort, the *Linking Communities Project*, to cooperatively work towards flyway conservation of migratory shorebirds in western North America. A project to link schools, birders, and biologists along the migration pathway of Buff-breasted Sandpipers will begin in November of 2001.

III. Issues and Challenges

The shorebird community has a solid foundation of using a hemispheric approach to conservation issues. Further collaboration and cooperation would greatly enhance overall shorebird conservation efforts. However, gaps in knowledge, capacity, communications, and management activities currently hamper our ability to develop an effective, hemispheric approach to shorebird conservation.

A. An Inadequate Scientific Knowledge Base

1. Basic scientific information on population status, seasonal distribution and abundance, and habitat requirements are lacking, and the biology of many endemic and resident bird species that share habitats with migrant shorebirds is

unknown. Much of this information is needed to formulate an effective population trend monitoring program.

2. Little research has addressed the factors that limit population growth in shorebirds, particularly on the wintering grounds.
3. Linkages of wintering grounds to specific breeding populations is largely unknown for many species.
4. Information that has been collected and compiled is often not cataloged or readily available; this is a hemisphere-wide problem. Many monitoring protocols are being implemented or developed throughout the hemisphere and would benefit by some degree of standardization and collaboration when possible.

B. Insufficient Communication and Outreach

1. Habitat management practices are inadequately documented, evaluated, and communicated. As new management practices are adopted, or old practices are continued, increased communication is needed to share with other managers the effectiveness of applied methods.
2. No communications network or forum exists in the Western Hemisphere for shorebird conservationists, including biologists, land managers, educators, land owners, and others to share their ideas and techniques.
3. Environmental education materials are insufficient and are not distributed broadly enough throughout the Western Hemisphere. A lack of training workshops have prevented teachers from widely using existing materials in the classroom.
4. Public awareness and support of shorebird and wetland conservation initiatives are insufficient. Reports written for scientific journals and presented at conferences are not shared in a format that is usable by community members, managers, educators, land owners, and birding enthusiasts.

C. Limited Organizational and Technical Capacity

1. A very limited technical infrastructure restricts the ability to gather and disseminate key information. Hence, poorly informed decisions related to shorebird conservation often result and few areas important to migrant shorebirds are protected.
2. Institutions, agencies and organizations have limited or no expertise in shorebird conservation. There is a need for personnel who are capable of

providing adequate technical training to biologists, land managers and others involved in conservation.

D. Lack of Sufficient Funding

With the resources currently available, it will be impossible to act on the list of needs presented in the preceding sections. Resourcing strategies must be developed to meet these needs. Integration of existing funding sources with new money will ensure that conservation occurs in an efficient and capable manner. Effective resourcing strategies will help individual countries to address conservation priorities.

IV. Action Items

Implicit to a Western Hemisphere approach is the participation of as many Latin American nations as possible in planning for and implementing action items. Without the support and participation of Latin American countries and organizations, it will be impossible to increase the knowledge base, increase capacity, communicate conservation needs and establish well funded conservation projects for shorebirds.

Actions presented below are consistent with the resolution from the recent meeting of OAS environment ministers in Montreal that states: “we strongly support the development of a hemispheric strategy to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of migratory species throughout the Americas, beginning with the management of migratory birds, building on existing bird conservation initiatives, and including, *inter alia*, the protection of wintering and breeding areas and migration routes of species within and across boundaries.”

Ideally, all bird conservation will proceed as a single, coordinated conservation initiative; however, if this is not possible, a lack of coordination among conservation efforts should not stop the following shorebird actions from proceeding anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

A. Increase the Scientific Knowledge Base

1. Seek, support, and promote projects that provide basic information on distribution, abundance, and habitat requirements of migrant shorebirds in Latin America. Encourage projects to address resident shorebirds and other bird species that share habitats with Nearctic-Neotropical migrants. Recruit sites in Latin American for inclusion in WHSRN.
2. Seek, support, and promote research programs that endeavor to understand key limiting factors and threats to shorebirds in breeding, wintering, and stop-over areas.
3. Integrate existing band-reporting and observational projects (Pan-American Shorebird Program, Western Atlantic Shorebird Association, Buff-breasted Sandpiper Project) into a single hemispheric program.

4. Ensure monitoring protocols are coordinated and compatible across the Western Hemisphere (e.g., North American Shorebird Assessment and Monitoring Program). Invite participation of Latin Americans in development of these protocols. Update WHSRN profiles for Latin America.

B. Enhance Communications and Outreach

1. Review and modify the current Spanish language WHSRN training manual ("Aves Playeras: Ecología y Conservación") for broad applicability in Latin America. Support the development of a training program in wetlands and waterbirds for wildlife biologists (especially non-governmental) and for decision-makers to establish a sound community of leaders and field professionals.
2. Support a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Forum that would allow biologists, managers, educators, land owners, and others to meet and discuss future plans for shorebird conservation, evaluate existing scientific, management, and outreach methods. Solicit information for *Shorebirds.org* website.
3. Fund Shorebird Sister Schools Program (SSSP) Coordinators in Latin America to allow them the opportunity to conduct shorebird education workshops, field trips, and festivals in their countries. Translate materials for the SSSP E-mail list server and web page; recruit communities in the Shorebird Sister Cities Program.
4. Encourage publication and distributing of research results to peer and lay audiences. Support translation of these documents into multiple languages. Support publication of WHSRN's *Shorebird Atlas*.

C. Build Organizational and Technical Capacity

1. Support development of international conventions and agreements and regional plans that address conservation of migratory shorebirds.
2. Assist and support Joint Ventures, WHSRN, and other partnerships in the development of research, management, and education projects that link geographically through the Western Hemisphere.
3. Facilitate technical and educational exchanges, including internships, small workshops and seminars by agency personnel, organizations, students where appropriate and where infrastructure for such exchanges exists or can be developed. Such exchanges would take place throughout the Western Hemisphere (Canada/US personnel to Latin America, Latin American personnel to Canada/US).

4. Develop, support, and promote workshops that address management, monitoring, policy, education, and outreach for migratory shorebirds and their wetland habitats.

D. Supply Adequate Funding

1. Develop a compendium of funding opportunities for shorebird and wetlands education, research, monitoring, and management projects throughout the hemisphere.
2. Encourage and support new and existing funding mechanisms for projects that work toward the conservation of shorebirds and their habitats throughout the Western Hemisphere.
3. Encourage partners to submit proposals for funding under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act.

V. Summary

We recommend that the Council adopt and promote a Western Hemisphere approach to shorebird conservation by reviewing and implementing the actions outlined in this paper. Before full implementation is undertaken, however, we suggest a review by not less than ten Latin American shorebird specialists to ensure actions items agreed on by the Council mesh with Latin American and Caribbean perspectives.

This document is being reviewed concurrently by the Canadian Shorebird Conservation Plan National Working Group. Cooperation between the two national plans will ensure that future international conservation action will proceed in a coordinated fashion towards meeting international priorities will develop a similar set of actions.

Once the Council has agreed on the need for implementation, a full discussion of the strategies for implementation (consistent with Latin American and Caribbean input) should take place.