

100 years of international bird conservation

CELEBRATING THE MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY.

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It's hard to imagine a world without mallards, robins or bald eagles. Yet North America was headed down that exact path about 150 years ago, as rapid habitat conversion and overhunting put extraordinary pressure on bird populations.

Now, at the dawn of 2016, Wisconsin joins the rest of the nation in celebrating the Migratory Bird Treaty Centennial. This historic event acknowledges the importance of bird conservation, the

decades of work that have granted birds their current levels of protection and the state and multinational partnerships committed to helping migratory bird populations recover.



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Prior to the Migratory Bird Treaty, hunting regulations were inconsistent and unenforced, and overhunting was rampant. One of these hunters had taken 113 geese during the spring of 1911.

Overcoming exploitation

Life for birds in 19th-century Wisconsin reflected that of most of the country: nesting and foraging habitats were disappearing at breakneck speed while unregulated market hunting plundered birds from the skies in great numbers and at any time of year. According to the *Janesville Gazette*, demand for duck and goose meat, swan skin, egret plumes and iridescent feathers for women's hats resulted in the harvest of over one million Wisconsin birds in 1881 alone.

The consequences of such reckless treatment of wildlife eventually became apparent. Concerned hunters and citizens, noticing scarcity among formerly common bird species, called for protective measures. Wisconsin passed its first laws to regulate migratory bird use in

The Kirtland's warbler, protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty, is once again breeding in Wisconsin.

the 1850s. However, such laws only addressed birds during the time they spent in Wisconsin, and inconsistent protection across state and international borders complicated wildlife management efforts. Additionally, legislation arrived too late to prevent the loss of some Wisconsin species (wild turkey, whooping crane and trumpeter swan, all later reintroduced). Passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets vanished entirely from Wisconsin — and the world — by the early 1900s.

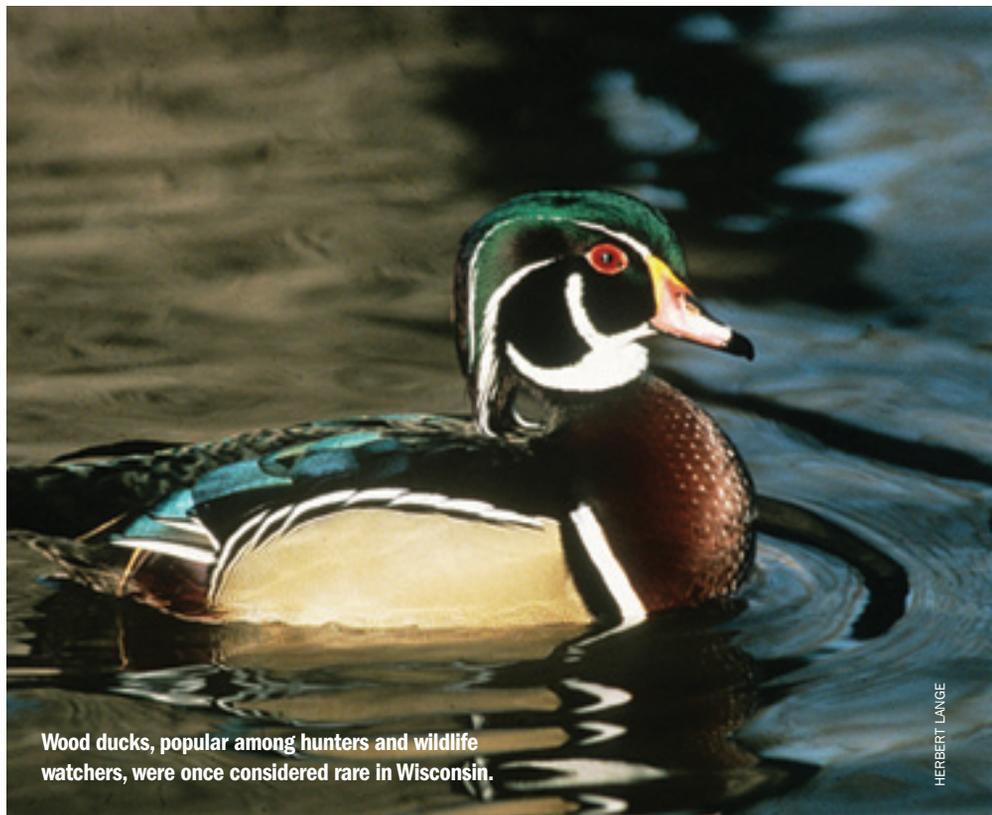
Fortunately, societal attitudes were shifting as people realized birds were a unique and cherished part of America's natural heritage. A major grassroots campaign, set in motion by citizens, hunters and groups such as the Audubon Society and Izaak Walton League, rallied support for bird protection in every corner of the nation. In response, lawmakers passed the Lacey Act in 1900, which targeted the illegal wildlife trade. The Weeks-McLean Act followed in 1913, setting hunting seasons nationwide, prohibiting spring migratory bird hunting and cracking down on the feather trade. However, a turning point in bird conservation arrived as the United States and Great Britain (for Canada) signed the Migratory Bird Treaty nearly 100 years ago on August 16, 1916.

A treaty for the birds

That historic day, the governments of the United States and Canada recognized the ecological and social values of birds and presented a unified bird conservation and management framework applicable to both countries. The treaty prohibited harvesting, capturing, disturbing and selling or trading migratory birds and their nests and eggs without an appropriate permit. However, it allowed hunting and damage control for certain species guided by wildlife management principles.

"The Migratory Bird Treaty set the stage for all the major bird protections we have today," says Owen Boyle, DNR's Natural Heritage Conservation section chief. "It has helped us build lasting partnerships both within the United States and with our neighboring countries."

Considering the social and political climates at the time the Migratory Bird Treaty was drafted, its degree of foresight and attention to detail are impressive. In the early 1900s, the fields of conservation and wildlife management were still in their infancy and research-



Wood ducks, popular among hunters and wildlife watchers, were once considered rare in Wisconsin.

HERBERT LANGE

based management would not be widely practiced for decades. However, the framers of the treaty understood that migratory birds were vulnerable both in their nesting and migration habitats, and that certain migratory game birds required sustained closed seasons to promote stable populations.

It was not long before the United States put these principles into action. In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, one of the oldest and most well-known wildlife conservation laws in the United States, implemented the rules outlined in the Migratory Bird Treaty. At present, this law regulates the capture, harvest and possession of most native birds and their eggs, nests and parts. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act launched a new era in bird conservation, making it possible for states to succeed in their own conservation efforts within the law's guidelines and through a cooperative approach. These protections have allowed for the recovery of multiple species.

For instance, trumpeter swans fell victim to the wildlife trade for their meat, skin and feathers. They were extirpated across the Great Lakes region by the late-19th century and state-listed as endangered in Wisconsin in the 1980s. A restoration program initiated in 1987 alongside Michigan and Minnesota, largely utilizing eggs from Alaskan

trumpeters, achieved success far beyond the year 2000 Wisconsin recovery goal of 20 breeding and migratory pairs. Trumpeters were removed from Wisconsin's endangered species list in 2009.

"In 2015, Wisconsin's estimated breeding population reached nearly 4,700 swans — a testament to a broad array of conservation partners working together," says DNR avian ecologist Sumner Matteson, who directed the program.

This has contributed to the rebound of the Great Lakes population, which currently numbers about 28,000 swans.

Overcoming exploitation

Importantly, the Migratory Bird Treaty laid the groundwork for collaboration in bird conservation and management across both state and national borders. Prior to the signing of the treaty, governments operated more or less independently with regard to migratory bird management. Today, state and provincial agencies work with the governments of the United States and Canada to manage birds and their habitats within four flyway councils, established in 1952.

"As a waterfowl production state, Wisconsin works with other state, federal and provincial agencies within the Mississippi Flyway Council to ensure that citizens in Wisconsin and elsewhere can enjoy and hunt healthy populations

of waterfowl,” says Kent Van Horn, DNR migratory bird specialist.

The wood duck is one such species. Hunters look forward to pursuing these ducks in the fall, and wildlife viewers appreciate the striking coloration of the drakes. Though a familiar sight today, wood ducks were considered rare in Wisconsin by 1912. Following the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the federal government expanded waterfowl refuges and initiated the Federal Duck Stamp program in 1934, while Wisconsin imposed closed or restricted seasons on wood ducks periodically throughout the 1950s as population levels fluctuated. These tactics paid off; since the 1970s, Wisconsin has protected hundreds of thousands of acres of wetland habitat, and the wood duck population has grown steadily, allowing for more hunting opportunities.

The Migratory Bird Treaty’s reach grew in 1936 with the convention between the United States and Mexico, and subsequently with Japan and Russia in the 1970s. These conventions extended protective measures to birds on wintering grounds and to additional groups of birds including raptors, crows and jays. Migratory bird protection achieved a more holistic dimension with the treaties with Japan and Russia, which specifically emphasized habitat conservation, environmental protection and conservation of birds throughout their life cycles.

Collaboration for bird conservation

The treaty provided an unprecedented degree of protection to a diverse set of birds over a large geographical area, in a short amount of time. Without such protections, numerous additional birds would no doubt have gone the way of the passenger pigeon. Yet the story of management and recovery of these birds has inspired people to both appreciate their presence and contribute to their conservation.

Interest in birds and conservation has grown by leaps and bounds since the original Migratory Bird Treaty. About 33 percent of Wisconsin residents watch birds, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, and non-governmental organizations such as the Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology devote considerable energy to migratory bird conservation and habitat enhancement.

“Wisconsin is an important breeding area for birds and provides some of the



Trumpeter swans have made a remarkable recovery in Wisconsin and across the Great Lakes region thanks to conservation partnerships.

DNR FILE

best bird-related recreational experiences in the United States,” says DNR research scientist Ryan Brady. “Citizens can take that a step further by helping us monitor populations. For example, anyone can contribute observations to eBird, an online bird observation database used by scientists and other conservationists, or Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas II, a statewide survey that provides a baseline for breeding bird abundance and distribution.”

In recent years, new and diverse bird conservation initiatives have emerged across the country. Partners in Flight, founded in 1990, unites governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, industry representatives, educators and scientists with goals of recovering threatened species and keeping common birds common. The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (established in 1998) and the Wisconsin

Bird Conservation Initiative (organized in 2001) synthesize federal, state and partner efforts to improve bird habitat and monitor birds on an ecological scale. The Wisconsin Stopover Initiative (founded in 2005) takes a habitat-level approach to conservation, encouraging migratory stopover habitat preservation on both private and public lands in the Great Lakes region. Bird City Wisconsin, launched in 2009, encourages entire communities to implement bird-friendly practices.

The blooming of such partnerships has sparked broad-scale conservation plans that aim to stabilize populations of threatened birds, such as Kirtland’s warblers, along their entire migratory routes.

Narrowly escaping extinction in the 20th century, Kirtland’s warblers nested only in the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan, and were rare even as

visitors in Wisconsin. However, through decades of conservation efforts, Michigan's breeding population increased five-fold to over 1,000 singing males by 2006. In 2007, three Kirtland's warbler nests were discovered in central Wisconsin, and a partnership between the Department of Natural Resources, federal agencies and private groups stepped in to manage jack pine and similar habitats for the birds. As a result, Wisconsin hosted over 20 breeding warblers by 2015, which produced 30 to 50 fledglings. Some of these birds were later observed as adults in their Bahamas wintering sites as well as Wisconsin, illustrating the significance of international bird conservation.

The Migratory Bird Treaty established a tradition of unity in bird conservation between countries, states and communities. Millions of people around the world cherish the ecological, social and cultural roles that birds play.

International appreciation of birds is perhaps best exemplified in the Migratory Bird Treaty between the United States and Russia (then the Soviet Union). Signed in the midst of the Cold War, this treaty demonstrated a remarkable commitment to set aside political differences in recognition of bird conservation as an international priority.

The centennial takes wing

Birds, with their cheerful chatter, brilliant coloration and enviable capability of flight, have the power to unite people from all walks of life. Connecting with these incredible animals is as easy as looking out the window, strolling through a local park or perfecting a duck call in autumn. Such connection can incite a lifelong dedication to birds and conservation. Additionally, both hunters and non-hunters stand to benefit from habitat improvements that provide for birds and enhance the envi-

ronment for us all.

Truly, the Migratory Bird Treaty centennial is a milestone in conservation. Wisconsin and the United States as a whole have accomplished monumental achievements in research, conservation and education over the past 100 years, and with our international partners have plucked some species from the brink of extinction.

However, a century of avian conservation and management has also demonstrated repeatedly that conservation is a constant and necessary intervention. Many of the birds we rely upon for pest control, seed dispersal, pollination and myriad other ecological functions face population declines exacerbated by perils along entire migratory paths. Threats such as habitat loss, competition from invasive birds and plants, predation by cats and other non-native animals, collisions with vehicles and structures and the use of pesticides and other chemicals can depress bird survival and reproduction.

Yet, these challenges only strengthen and expand cooperation across state and national boundaries. The deep bond with birds that spurred citizens to action during the age of exploitation solidifies with each generation, and as long as people are willing to fight for conservation, birds of all shapes, sizes and hues will continue to grace our skies well into the future.

The significance of the centennial is perfectly illustrated as healthy flocks of birds, once uncommon, return to Wisconsin each spring and fly south in the fall. Join your family, friends, community and fellow bird enthusiasts in celebration as you spot an elusive warbler or a pair of elegant sandhill cranes, or achieve your waterfowl limit for the day. Honor the world we share by making your home and yard bird-friendly, taking some time to observe birds in your area, or learning something new about birds. Get involved in your neighborhood by volunteering to monitor birds or restore habitat, attending one of Wisconsin's many birding events or teaching a child about birding or bird hunting.

The Migratory Bird Treaty made it possible to enjoy the abundant bird life that Wisconsin has to offer. By commemorating its success and gearing up for the next century of bird conservation, we can all help make 2016 a centennial to remember. 

MIGRATORY BIRD CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Over 80 percent of the birds commonly found in Wisconsin migrate across state or national borders. Some breed in Wisconsin and migrate to the southern United States or Latin America for the winter, while others breed far north in the Arctic and winter in Wisconsin.

In order to sustain bird populations across such large geographical ranges, local management must dovetail with a regional or continental conservation strategy. Conservation techniques consider the needs of birds across breeding, wintering and migration habitats.

Data on migration patterns and population status is limited for many species of birds, especially on wintering grounds outside the United States where habitat loss may be more severe. Migratory game bird management is even more complex, as states must work together to determine harvest limits within USFWS frameworks while at the same time balancing public desire for hunting opportunities.

Fortunately, habitat management techniques such as restoration and stopover site improvement are common among state and federal agencies and partner organizations. These landscape-scale efforts benefit multiple bird species and other wildlife as well.



TAYLOR FINGER

Migration patterns of lesser scaup (*Aythya affinis*). Each line represents an individual duck.

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