

North American Bird Conservation Initiative



Advancing Integrated Bird Conservation in North America

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The All-Bird Bulletin

Developing Partnerships with Land Trusts for Bird Conservation

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The importance of private land to birds is clear. Over sixty percent of the land area in the United States is privately owned, and more than 100 high priority bird species have more than 50 percent of their U.S. breeding distribution on private lands ([The State of the Birds, Private Lands, 2013](#)).

One increasingly widespread type of organization that is conserving birds and their habitats on private lands is the land trust. From 2005 to 2010, over 1,700 local, state, and national land trusts in the United States have more than doubled the number of acres conserved to 47 million—an area comparable to the amount of land protected by national parks.

Given the importance of land trusts in private land protection and stewardship—a priority of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI)—this issue of the *All-Bird Bulletin* is dedicated to highlighting the unique and important roles land trusts play as partners in bird conservation across the country.

But what is a land trust? A land trust is a nonprofit organization that actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land acquisition or the development of conservation easements. Land trusts work with landowners and the community to conserve land by accepting donations of land; purchasing land; negotiating private, voluntary conservation agreements on land; and stewarding conserved land through generations.

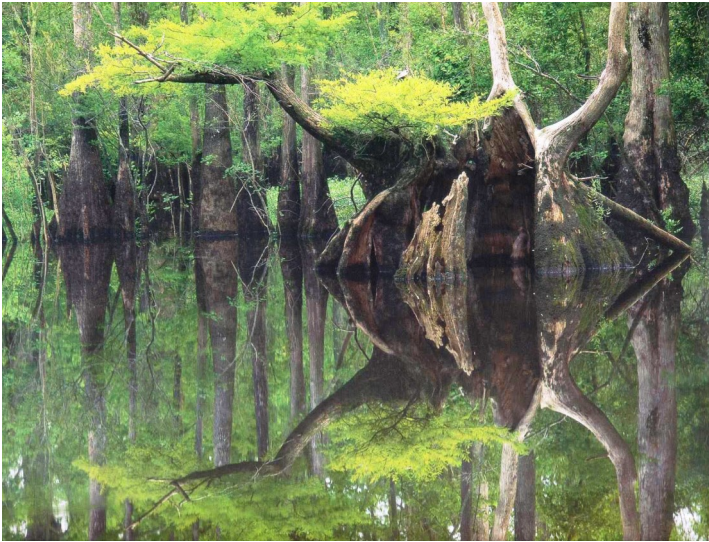
A Land Trust Initiative. To develop mutually beneficial collaborations between land trusts and the bird conservation community, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology launched a Land Trust Initiative in 2013. First, the Lab initiated a needs assessment to ensure that the initiative would be effective. It then conducted interviews and an online survey to learn more about land trusts' interests and experiences with bird



Cornell Lab of Ornithology staff talk to land trust and state agency partners about habitat management at the Grand Lakes Reserve demonstration site in New York. / Mark Scarlett

habitat conservation and related resources. This research was a cooperative effort of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the Land Trust Alliance, and Wings Over Western Waters (a consortium of land trusts with support from the Intermountain West and Pacific Birds Habitat Joint Ventures). In addition, the Advisory Team for the effort included Cornell University's Human Dimensions Research Unit, The Conservation Fund, and Finger Lakes Land Trust.

Survey Results. In spring 2014, the collaborators surveyed regional and local land trusts throughout the United States. Six hundred and fourteen land trusts responded to the survey—a response rate of 42 percent. This effort revealed four key insights about land trusts and their bird conservation efforts:



The Pee Dee Land Trust in South Carolina has worked to protect lands along the Pee Dee River, which hosts scenic swamps and numerous bird species.
/Tom Blagden

1. *Land Trusts Contribute to Bird Conservation*

In the last five years, nearly half of all land trusts put land under conservation easement due, at least in part, to the bird conservation benefits that would be gained. Similarly, over half of land trusts prioritized land for protection due to bird conservation benefits. Nearly two-thirds of land trusts considered information about birds when creating their land management plans.

2. *Land Trusts Act as Bird Stewards and Ambassadors*

In addition to habitat conservation, land trusts contribute to bird conservation in other ways. Land trusts reported hosting bird walks (62 percent), managing invasive species (57 percent), inventorying birds (52 percent), and installing and maintaining nest boxes (49 percent).

3. *Land Trusts Use Bird Conservation Information*

While many land trust representatives were tapping bird conservation information, they most commonly accessed this information through people who had already distilled it (47 percent) rather than from original publications and other sources such as bird conservation plans. The most popular source was a scientist they know who specializes in birds (47 percent), followed closely by biodiversity data that includes information on birds (42 percent) and information from Audubon's Important Bird Areas program (41 percent). Although regional and state conservation plans were used by a third of land trusts, national conservation plans and bird species conservation plans were used by only 17 percent and 19 percent of land trusts respectively.

4. *More Resources Mean More Conservation*

For land trusts, funding is the greatest barrier to conserving more bird habitat. More than three-quarters of all land trusts strongly agreed that their ability to conserve bird habitat would increase with access to new grant programs, matching fund sources for grants, availability of volunteers to help with monitoring, and a tool to allow staff or volunteers to inventory or monitor birds.

Results from this survey, published in 2014 ([Dayer, Rodewald, Stedman, Cosbar, and Rohrbaugh](#)) will guide future efforts with land trusts by the cooperating partners, the NABCI Private Lands Subcommittee, and others interested in working with land trusts on bird conservation.

Meeting Land Trust Needs. In response to these needs, the Lab has launched an [e-newsletter](#) to help land trusts access bird conservation resources. This publication is already reaching over 500 land trusts nationwide. The first issue focused on results of this survey and how the [Migratory Bird Habitat Joint Ventures](#) can benefit land trusts. The Lab is developing a companion website due to launch in early 2016. The site will connect land trusts with national and regional bird conservation resources and help them use the resources effectively to increase the pace and impact of land conservation and stewardship.

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This *All-Bird Bulletin* focuses on partnership efforts occurring between land trusts and the bird conservation community to engage private landowners and local communities in conservation. The Nature Conservancy's collaboration with the Lab on a unique "reverse auction" project for migratory waterbirds in the Central Valley of California is one such example (Page 14). Other highlights include Golden-winged Warbler conservation needs on private lands, which are a driving factor for several land trusts in Southern Appalachia (page 4) and the St. Lawrence Valley of New York (Page 6). In fact, all across New England and eastern New York informal networks of public and private organizations, called Regional Conservation Partnerships, are working with local communities and landowners to achieve conservation and stewardship on a landscape scale for birds and other wildlife (Page 8).

The Sonoma Land Trust, north of San Francisco, recently made a big splash for birds with the breaching of an historic levee—the culmination of a ten-year effort to restore tidal wetland habitat for waterbirds and other wildlife (Page 10). In coastal South Carolina, numerous land trusts are conserving thousands of acres of a diverse array of habitats for many priority bird species (Page 12). The National Audubon Society reports that 45 percent of Important Bird Area lands in the U.S. are unprotected, and highlights examples of the important role land trusts are playing in conserving private lands on IBAs across the country (Page 16).

Point Blue Conservation Science describes how land management practices, developed from its oak woodland bird monitoring results, are being adopted by land trusts and private landowners interested in supporting focal species on their lands (Page 20). The Pacific Birds Habitat Joint Venture reviews land trust accomplishments throughout their region on Page 22, and the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust describes their work across the state in partnership with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies on Page 24. Finally, an effort by two land trust executive directors, one in Alaska and one in Colorado, to develop a landscape-scale bird conservation initiative in the West, entitled *Wings Over Western Waters*, is described on Page 26.

Community-based conservation is the way of the future. Engaging people across the country in understanding, caring about, and conserving their home ground is a critical need, whether through outreach and education, citizen science, on-the-ground conservation, or advocacy. Land trusts are playing unique and essential roles in this effort by working directly with individuals and communities to protect and conserve their land. In some cases, the land has been people's livelihood, and in others it simply holds great meaning for the opportunities it offers for appreciating nature and wildlife—experiences many landowners want to ensure are available for future generations.

The partners featured in this issue of *The All-Bird Bulletin* understand the importance of private land conservation to the health of bird populations and humans as well. Read on and learn more about how land trusts are making a difference for birds!



Birds such as Blackpoll Warbler, in fall plumage above, benefit from forest conservation on private lands throughout the Northeast. / Donna Dewhurst