Collaborative Conservation: Engaging Communities through Birds

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Birders at one newly-created eBird Hotspot on a Kent Land Trust trail in the Macedonia block helped guide habitat restoration by reporting which species were using the area.

In 2019, the "Decline of North American Avifauna" report, published in the journal *Science*, startled the conservation world with its conclusion that nearly two billion birds had disappeared from the continent since 1970. The news caused alarm and—crucially—a wave of fresh thinking about how to bring birds back.

The question was no longer whether birds were declining. The question became: what works?

One promising answer is taking shape in the Northeastern U.S. The Northeast Bird Habitat Conservation Initiative, led by Highstead Foundation in Redding and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is weaving together a network of land trusts, scientists, landowners, and conservation organizations from Virginia to Maine. Known as the NBHCI, the initiative provides tools and expertise to translate big, continental-scale bird population data into local action on the ground. In Connecticut, the Macedonia Forest Block, a 22,580-acre swath of largely unbroken woods in Kent and Sharon, is a testing ground for this approach.

Why Macedonia Matters

Macedonia is one of the largest remaining forest blocks in Connecticut, and it plays an outsized role in sustaining birds. Biologists and community scientists have documented more than 140 species there, including many species most imperiled by habitat loss.

Its fields still hold the bubbling songs of Bobolinks and the buzzy notes of Savannah Sparrows. In the deep woods, Wood Thrushes, Cerulean Warblers, and Scarlet Tanagers find the large, unbroken tracts of forest they require. In shrubby edges and regenerating fields, Prairie Warblers and Brown Thrashers nest in numbers that are increasingly rare elsewhere in the state.

In short, Macedonia provides a cross-section of the bird habitats Connecticut needs to sustain—grasslands, interior forests, and shrublands—at a time when all three are under pressure.

From Local to Regional: The Initiative at Work

What makes Macedonia more than just a haven for birds is the way local work is being connected to regional strategies through the Initiative.

Kent Land Trust is helping private landowners manage their woods in ways that are better for birds. With support from the Northeast Bird Habitat Conservation Initiative, it is testing a program based on one that has worked in Vermont. The idea is to bring neighboring woodland owners together instead of treating them as separate, isolated managers. Landowners get advice at workshops from forestry experts and also learn from each other. The program encourages people to care for their own land while also working with their neighbors to benefit the whole landscape.

The idea is simple but powerful: birds don't recognize property boundaries. If Bobolinks are to survive, or if Wood Thrushes are to thrive, then stewardship must extend across fence lines and town lines. By connecting landowners to a community, the Initiative helps ensure that habitat patches add up to more than the sum of their parts.

The Role of Community Science

The NBHCI also relies heavily on eBird. The global bird observation platform, created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is among the world's largest repositories of biodiversity data. It's a powerful tool for research, education, and conservation. It's essentially a large network of biodiversity "sensors"—1.2 million people have contributed over two billion bird observations. Every checklist submitted by a birder in the Macedonia region contributes to a real-time picture of what species are using the area, when, and in what numbers.

The eBird Science Team at the Cornell Lab uses bird checklists, environmental data, and satellite imagery. Then, through machine learning, it turns these into data products and visualizations of seasonal ranges, relative abundance, and population trends to help guide conservation decision-making and investments.The information is crucial. Conservation funding is limited, and data can help guide it to the places and species where it will make the most difference. The data have been used, for example, in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify low-risk eagle collision areas for siting wind energy projects during the permitting process, directly influencing federal policy decisions.

Kent Land Trust uses eBird data to inform its land management, taking note of birds throughout the seasons and what their presence might indicate about habitat improvement needs. It hosted workshops to show people how to use eBird and the Merlin app at the eBird Hotspots it created along its trails. The workshops emphasized the personal aspects of enjoying birdwatching and the benefits it has to conservation.

One eBird Hotspot at Kent Land Trust's home base is along a riverside trail where the land trust built a viewing platform. The Hotspot was created in 2020, and since then birders have submitted more than 150 checklists with 99 species (71 in 2025). These included increased sightings of Bald Eagles, Belted Kingfishers, and Green Herons. Double-crested Cormorants showed up in 2025. Waterfowl included Mallards, Common Mergansers, and Wood Ducks. In 2025, Kent Land Trust installed Wood Duck nestboxes and, while it has not confirmed their use, a family of 11

PHOTOS: PAUL J. FUSCO

Wood Thrush

Cerulean Warbler

Scarlet Tanager

Eastern Towhee

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Indigo Bunting

ducklings were raised in the oxbow pond adjoining the river over the summer. The eBird data has helped Kent Land Trust make other habitat restoration decisions as well, including the removal of invasive multiflora rose and privet thickets along the shore of the oxbow. The riverside trail also adjoins a small, organically-run farm, with open fields and many pollinators. The eBird checklists often included Cedar Waxwings, Baltimore Orioles, and Indigo Buntings (considered a species of greatest conservation need in Connecticut). To add to the farm's habitat, the land trust has planted native fruiting trees and shrubs in the areas cleared of invasives.

Connecting to the Bigger Picture

The work in Kent is not happening in isolation. The Northeast Bird Habitat Conservation Initiative is supporting a mosaic of local projects. In Maine, for example, the Ag Allies program works with farmers to implement bird-friendly practices (such as delaying mowing hayfields until birds have fledged) to protect grasslands for both birds and people. In New York and Vermont, Highstead's Regional Conservation Partnerships are restoring young and mature forest habitat to benefit species like Golden-winged Warbler and Wood Thrush.

These efforts demonstrate that the lessons of the 2019 bird decline report are being taken seriously. Conservationists are experimenting, collaborating, and finding new ways to link local stewardship with regional recovery.

The Northeast Bird Habitat Conservation Initiative is counting on local partners to help connect and educate communities and to monitor progress through programs such as The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Christmas and Summer Bird Counts, the Connecticut Bird Atlas, and of course eBird.

The Urgency of Now

The stakes could hardly be higher. Wood Thrushes—once a common voice of summer in Connecticut forests—have declined by more than 60 percent since 1970. Bobolink populations have fallen sharply as grasslands disappear. The beautiful Scarlet Tanager is slipping away—the population in Connecticut has fallen by about 65 percent—where large tracts of interior forest are broken up.

Macedonia is an attempt to show that with the right mix of habitat and human stewardship, these species can still find what they need. The challenge is ensuring that enough places like Macedonia remain—and that they are managed in ways that actively support bird life.

Conclusion: Building Hope Through Connection

When the "Decline of North American Avifauna" report was released, it was tempting to feel helpless in the face of staggering numbers. But the story unfolding in Kent, and across the Northeast, offers a different narrative. Through the NBHCI, local action— mowing fields at the right time for Bobolinks, protecting large forest blocks for Wood Thrushes, maintaining shrubland for Prairie Warblers—connects to a larger, coordinated strategy.

This is how birds will come back: not through a single sweeping policy or one heroic effort, but through hundreds of communities, thousands of landowners, and millions of data points, all pulling in the same direction.

Macedonia shows that when people rise to the challenge, birds respond. The task now is to multiply that success, so that the songs of Bobolinks, Wood Thrushes, and Scarlet Tanagers are not echoes of the past, but promises of a resilient future.

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Savannah Sparrow

Bobolink

PHOTOS: PAUL J. FUSCO

Common Merganser

Belted Kingfisher

Highstead, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Kent Land Trust are collaborating with private land owners to protect a cross section of key habitats in the Macedonia Forest Block along the Housatonic River.