

# The State of North America's Birds: Conservation Across Borders

by Andrew Couturier



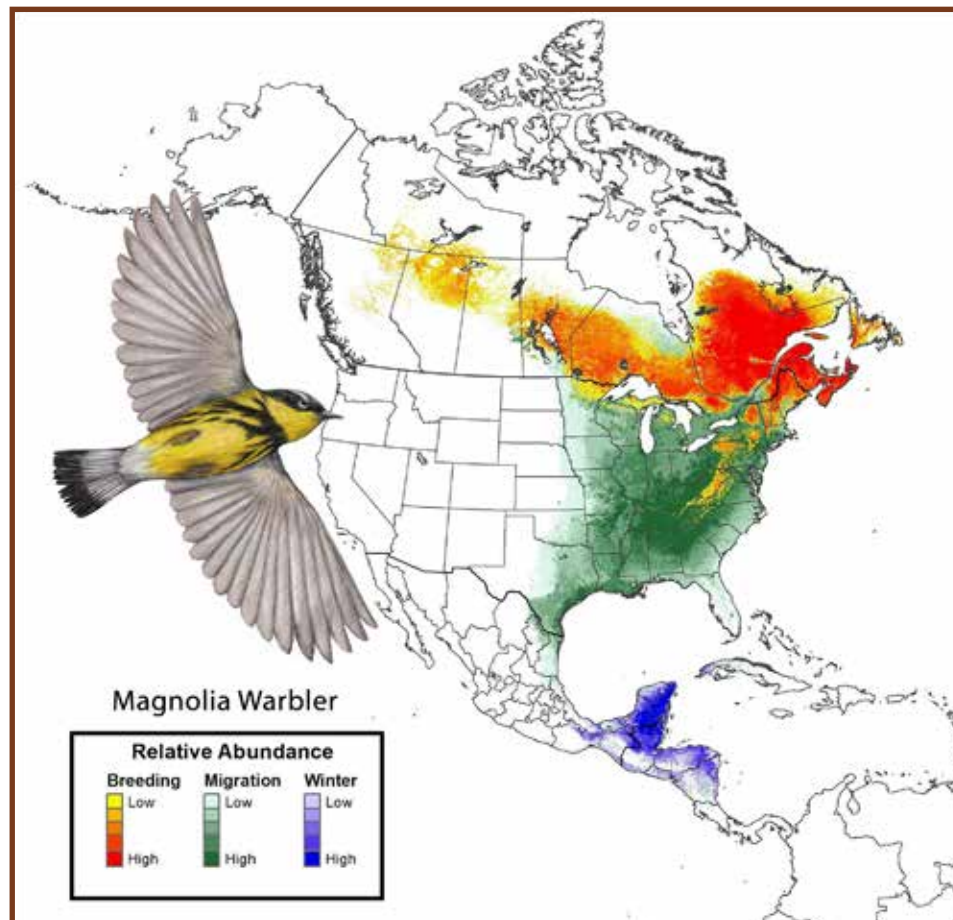
Barn Swallow/Hirondelle rustique Photo: Nick Saunders

North America's birds are experts at border-hopping. Millions – even billions – of birds move among Canada, the U.S., and Mexico each year. Some 350 species share their distribution across two or more of the three countries, and many travel even farther. The Bobolink, for example, flies some 10,000 km from its wintering grounds in southern South America to nest in the grasslands of North America.

Migratory birds provide invaluable ecosystem services such as pest control and pollination, and they also inspire us with their beauty, strength, and song. Border-hopping species share habitats with resident (non-migratory) species at certain times of year, making their fates intertwined. Experts agree that coordinated conservation within the continent and beyond is necessary for the survival of all bird species.

But what do we actually know about the status of our birds? *The State of North America's Birds 2016* ([www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org)) has some answers. This new report was developed by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative. Bird Studies Canada is a member organization and collaborated closely on the development of the report, which was based on data collected by tens of thousands of Citizen Scientists across North America. The results are a call to action to governments, private industry, and the public to come together to support a beloved shared resource: our migratory birds.

This unprecedented, continent-wide analysis demonstrates the collective power of people to help us understand conservation needs – and to make



Working across borders is essential to conserve beloved North American species such as the Magnolia Warbler. Map by Andrew Couturier, Bird Studies Canada.

conservation happen. The report comes on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Migratory Birds Convention between Canada and the United States (see our cover story from the last issue of *BirdWatch Canada*, Spring 2016, No. 75). Now, more than ever, investment is needed to conserve birds and habitats across borders.

## Major Findings

Of the 1154 bird species that occur in North America, one third require urgent conservation action. In particular, birds that depend on oceans and tropical forests are most imperiled due to severe habitat threats, restricted ranges, and declining



Tufted Puffin/Macareux huppé Photo: Alan Burger

populations. Species that rely on coasts, grasslands, and aridlands are faring poorly on average, while results for temperate forests, tundra, wetlands, and the boreal forest are mixed.

More than half of our seabirds are considered in crisis. They are threatened by ocean pollution, over-fishing, energy extraction, invasive species on islands that predate nests, and climate change. Bird Studies Canada is working with Birdlife International and other partners in the Pacific to eradicate invasive species from globally significant Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas.

Coastal sites, upon which shorebirds and other species depend, are under pressure from a mix of factors including development, rising sea levels, and habitat degradation. Aerial insectivores – birds that feed on insects that they snatch out of the air – continue to be in dire straits. Through dedicated monitoring and stewardship programs for species such as the Chimney Swift and Barn Swallow, we are working to conserve these threatened birds.

More than half of Mexican tropical forest resident bird species are imperiled due to dramatic habitat loss. Because many of Canada's familiar migratory songbirds (see Magnolia Warbler map for an example)

use this same tropical forest habitat during our winter, the effects of deforestation in the south can be felt right across North America. Bird Studies Canada is working across borders on a number of programs to improve outcomes for birds (e.g., the Motus Wildlife Tracking System; the Canada Warbler Conservation Initiative; and our Latin America Training Program). Visit [www.birdscanada.org](http://www.birdscanada.org) to learn more about these projects and other aspects of our international collaborations.

Grassland birds are facing some of the steepest population declines of any group. The vast majority of our continent's pre-settlement prairie has been converted to agriculture and residential development. As a result, grassland birds cling to fragmented remnants of their original habitats. Bird Studies Canada is working with partners across North and South America, including the beef industry, to promote best management practices for the agricultural sector and improve conditions for grassland birds.

## It's Not All Bad News

Are these troubling results surprising? Unfortunately, no. They confirm the findings of past studies, including our own

breeding bird atlas projects, and *The State of Canada's Birds 2012* report.

In spite of these alarming numbers, we know that when people push for positive change, bird conservation succeeds. One hundred years ago, passionate wildlife supporters encouraged national leaders to invest in bird conservation by signing the Migratory Birds Convention and putting an end to market hunting. Investments in wetlands have paid off, too, with most waterfowl species showing encouraging population trends. Raptor species have also rebounded in recent years due to successful conservation measures.

We must be vigilant to sustain these successes and to write a better future for all birds. A comprehensive, renewed commitment to bird conservation across all groups of bird species is needed. There is good reason to be hopeful.

## The Power of Many

The actions of individuals can have far-reaching positive impacts. Simple acts can help, such as choosing sustainably created products (e.g., grass-fed beef, certified sustainable paper products, certified sustainable seafood, and bird-friendly coffee), stewarding key habitats, preventing bird collisions with windows on our houses and office buildings, and participating in Bird Studies Canada's many Citizen Science programs.

Taking care of key places for birds, such as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, is another concrete way to make a difference on the ground. Many species rely on discrete locations for stopover, breeding, or wintering. Stewardship and conservation at these priority sites is key to the long-term persistence of bird populations. IBA Caretakers help with activities such as bird monitoring, awareness-building, habitat improvement, advocacy, and protection. Visit [www.ibacanada.org](http://www.ibacanada.org) or email [iba@birdscanada.org](mailto:iba@birdscanada.org) for more information.

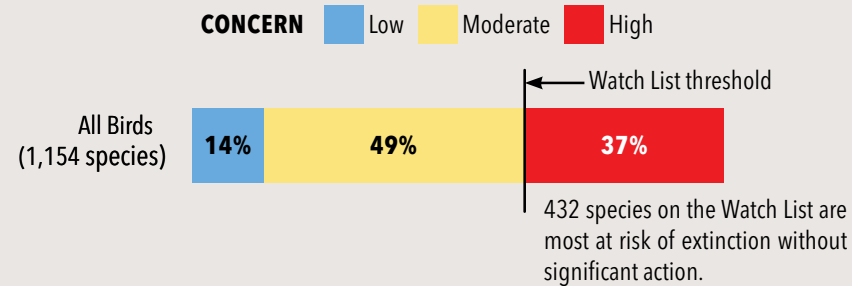
See our list of top ways to help birds on our website, or in the Spring 2016 edition of *BirdWatch Canada*. You can make a difference, and your efforts are greatly appreciated!

The full State of North America's Birds report and related materials are available at [www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org). Visit [www.birdscanada.org](http://www.birdscanada.org) to get involved in a conservation project near you.

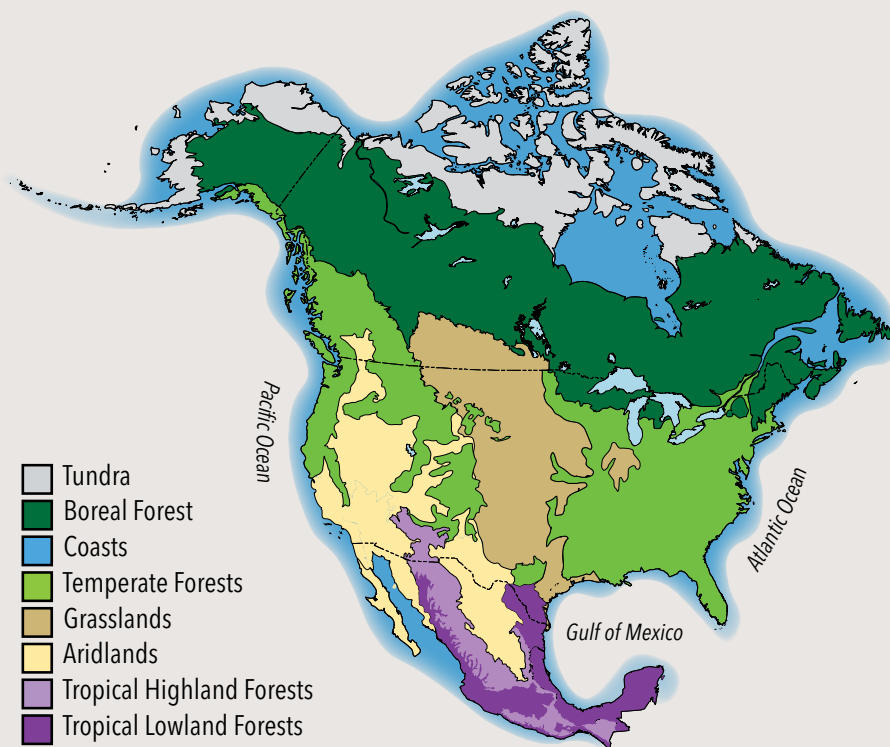
# State of North America's Birds

Birds in ocean and tropical forest habitats are of highest conservation concern. But species need our help in every habitat.

## ONE-THIRD OF ALL NORTH AMERICAN BIRD SPECIES NEED URGENT CONSERVATION ACTION

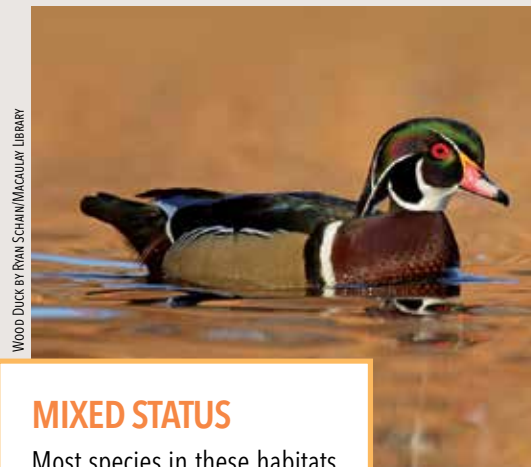


## MAJOR HABITATS OF NORTH AMERICA



This report assesses the conservation status of all native North American bird species across all major habitats, including wetlands embedded within terrestrial habitats. Species were assigned to one breeding habitat, except for oceans and coasts (where species were also included if they occurred anytime during the year) and wetlands (where species were included in both wetlands and their terrestrial breeding habitat). Species that commonly occur in many different habitat types were classified as generalists.

## CONSERVATION CONCERN ACROSS HABITATS

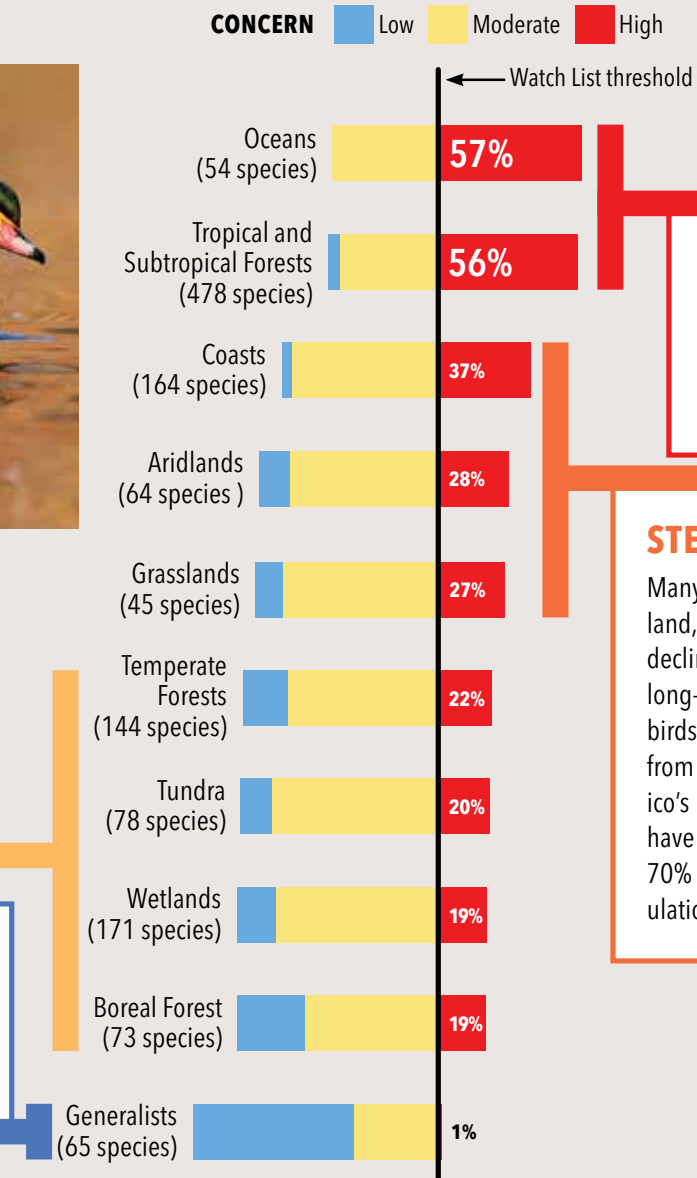


### MIXED STATUS

Most species in these habitats are of moderate or low concern, yet roughly 20% are on the Watch List. Waterfowl have benefited from careful harvest management and wetland conservation, but positive waterfowl trends may not last if wetlands loss continues.

### FARING WELL

The generalist group—birds that are adaptable and can live in multiple habitats—are of lowest conservation concern.



### IN CRISIS

More than half of species from oceans and tropical forests are on the Watch List because of small and declining populations, small ranges, and severe threats to their habitats.

### STEEP DECLINES

Many species in coastal, grassland, and aridland habitats are declining steeply. In particular, long-distance migratory shorebirds and species that migrate from the Great Plains to Mexico's Chihuahuan grasslands have lost, on average, almost 70% of their continental populations since 1970.

CHRISTOPHER COLLARED LONGSPUR BY GERRIT VYN



## OUR APPROACH

This report is based on the first-ever conservation vulnerability assessment for all 1,154 native bird species that occur in Canada, the continental United States, and Mexico. The assessment was compiled by a team of experts from all three countries. The overall conservation status for

each species takes into account its population trend, population size, extent of breeding and nonbreeding ranges, and severity of threats to populations. The Watch List identifies species of highest conservation concern based on high vulnerability scores across multiple factors. Year-round

abundance maps from eBird data, in which intensity of color reflects seasonal abundance, are presented for selected species. Animated eBird maps, as well as details on the assessment methodology and the complete Species Assessment Database, are available at [stateofthebirds.org](http://stateofthebirds.org).