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to the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife  
Legislative Hearing on  
Recovering America's Wildlife Act (H.R. 3742)  
Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act (H.R. 2795)

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Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today, representing the National Audubon Society (Audubon), to discuss H.R. 3742, the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, and H.R. 2795, the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act.

Audubon's mission is to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. Audubon represents 1.7 million members and has 465 affiliated chapters, 22 state offices, and 41 nature centers across the country.

My name is Marnie Urso, and I'm the Policy Director for Audubon Great Lakes, a regional office of the National Audubon Society. I have worked on conservation policy initiatives in the Great Lakes region and in Washington, DC for more than 20 years, including 14 years with National Audubon Society.

### **The Need to Act**

It's a particularly poignant moment to speak to the committee about the need for wildlife conservation. We know we are in the midst of an extinction crisis. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report found that up to a million wildlife species face extinction across the planet. The 2016 State of the Birds Report found that one-third of the continent's birds are in need of urgent conservation action. But two new groundbreaking studies published in the past few weeks paint the clearest picture yet of the urgent need for action to invest in the conservation of birds.

First, on September 19<sup>th</sup>, the preeminent journal *Science* published an unprecedented study, which found that since 1970, North America has lost nearly 3 billion birds. That's more than 1 out of 4 birds that have vanished from the continent. The declines aren't limited to rare or threatened species but are even seen in many of our common backyard birds, such as Blue Jays, which have declined by 20%, or Baltimore Orioles, which have fallen 44%. These findings have caused deep concern not only for our members, but for the broader public, and for people across the globe for what it tells us about the precarious state of our natural world.

The study, titled "The Decline of the North American Avifauna", included authors from the United States Geological Survey, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, and more. It found widespread declines across nearly all groups of birds. The most significant losses were seen in grassland species. The study found that we have 720 million fewer grassland birds compared to 50 years ago, meaning that more than half of these birds are gone. 3 out of 4 Eastern Meadowlarks have disappeared, representing a 75%

decline, and we've lost 65 million Western Meadowlarks – signifying a major loss of our grassland and farmland heritage. Additionally, forest species have lost about one billion birds while desert species, coastal birds, and tundra species also have experienced significant declines.

While this study did not focus on the causes of the declines, the authors encourage targeted research to continue to identify threats, and they cite a number of established contributing factors, many of which interact with one another, including “the ongoing threats of habitat loss, agricultural intensification, coastal disturbance, and direct anthropogenic mortality, all exacerbated by climate change”.

If the recent report painted a grave picture of the past, Audubon issued a report last week that provides us with a stark choice for our future. In *Survival By Degrees: 389 Species on the Brink*, Audubon scientists found that two-thirds of North American birds are threatened with extinction by climate change.

However, by limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius we can save the vast majority of those species. Birds are telling us that it's time to take action on climate. And we have hope because we know what we need to do to help the birds we all love – protect the places birds need now and in the future, and advance solutions at the state and federal levels to address the root causes of climate change.

Birds have been squeezed out of their ranges across the country due to habitat loss. Climate change threatens to throw what's left into upheaval by disconnecting the food, water, and safe places they need to raise their young, while multiplying ongoing threats, due to severe weather events, drought, fire, flooding, and rising seas. The report found that 389 species are directly in harm's way. Those with the highest risk include birds that depend on the Arctic tundra and boreal forest. More than 3 in 4 waterbirds are vulnerable, including waterfowl and shorebirds, while forest birds could see their narrow habitat zones disappear. Beloved species, such as the Common Loon, Wood Thrush, Mountain Bluebird, Cerulean Warbler, and even backyard birds such as nuthatches, orioles, and wrens are at risk. Common Loons are projected to lose more than a quarter of their range with 3 degree warming. Piping Plover, a conservation priority species in Michigan and the Great Lakes, were found to be highly vulnerable. And many of the state birds of the members of this Committee could lose most if not all of their ranges including the California Quail, the Brown Thrasher in Georgia, the American Goldfinch in New Jersey, and the Ruffed Grouse in Pennsylvania.

The report also shows how important it is to act now. More than 3 in 4 bird species will be better off if we limit warming to 1.5 degrees rather than 3 degrees Celsius. While we urgently need to reduce emissions, we must also redouble our efforts in conservation to give birds a fighting chance, especially by protecting and restoring the landscapes they need.

Alarm bells are ringing, perhaps louder than any time since the publication of *Silent Spring*, which predicted a deafening silence of birdlife in our communities if we failed to take action. “It was a spring without voices”, as Carson reflected. “On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh”. In many communities, this was becoming a reality, as she asked, “What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America?”

These warning signs also harken back to the time when the first Audubon Societies were established in the late 19th century in communities across the country, when we discovered that bird populations were plummeting and species like the once-abundant Passenger Pigeon, and the Carolina Parakeet, were being

lost to extinction. American bird lovers organized to demand their elected representatives pass state and federal conservation laws culminating in the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, creation of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and establishment of state and federal wildlife agencies and other conservation organizations. Rachel Carson's dire warning led to the next wave of bedrock protections including the Endangered Species Act. As Americans, we have always led the world in protecting our natural heritage. Previous generations led the movements that set visionary goals and established critical safeguards. It's time we meet our own obligation to future generations to address a new wildlife crisis and put into place the solutions to ensure our children and grandchildren grow up to enjoy the call of a Common Loon in the North Woods.

## **Threats and Solutions**

The causes of the bird and wildlife crisis are many. Ongoing habitat loss, direct bird mortality from hazards such as collisions with structures, exposure to toxins and pollution, and more, invasive species and disease, and changing habitat conditions from rising temperatures, sea level rise, and storms, are altering the fundamental requirements for the survival of birds and other wildlife.

Birds are sentinels for the changes happening on our landscapes. They are the canaries in the coalmine. When we lose seabird populations whose marine food source – forage fish – is in decline, it alerts us to issues that threaten the fisheries so many communities depend on for food and economic security. Precipitous sage-grouse declines resulting from lost habitat due in part to invasive species and fire also signal the threat of lost forage for cattle over vast stretches of the intermountain west. Shorebirds losing habitat to development and sea level rise demonstrate the vulnerability of coastal communities who have lost their natural barriers – the marshes, dunes, and wetlands that can protect them from flooding and storm surge.

And as these declines accelerate, we lose out on the tremendous value that birds themselves provide to our communities. Birds not only provide joy to people through birdwatching or hunting, but also provide significant economic benefits, including from the \$100 billion birdwatching industry and the 860,000 jobs it creates. Birds also provide valuable pest control that contributes significant benefits to our agricultural and forestry industries by consuming insects that damage crops and trees, as well as vast numbers of mosquitoes and other insects in our communities.

We must redouble our efforts to protect and restore habitat at a landscape scale. Existing federal funding is critical to advancing effective habitat conservation. We need only look at the success of programs such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and the Duck Stamp, in which many years of consistent and dedicated funding and strong partnerships have helped turn around and stabilize waterfowl populations. In fact, the aforementioned study – “The Decline of the North American Avifauna” --- found that one of the only groups of birds to improve since 1970 were wetland species, such as waterfowl. Backed by conservation laws such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and rigorous science to study these populations, these programs have been significant success stories. Additionally, Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson have helped many other wildlife species so that species that were once on the brink of extinction can now be regularly seen and enjoyed by all of us.

But as the science has so starkly shown us – what we are doing already is not nearly enough. Recognizing the wildlife challenge, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies convened a Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish & Wildlife Resources, chaired by Wyoming Governor Dave

Freudenthal and Bass Pro Shops founder and CEO Johnny Morris to examine current conservation funding and recommend a mechanism to conserve our wildlife. The panel rightly determined that wildlife conservation is still significantly underfunded – in fact, states only have 5% of the resources they need to carry out their congressionally-required State Wildlife Action Plans to conserve species of critical conservation need and the habitats they and we rely on, from grasslands, to sagebrush, to forests, coasts, and deserts.

States play a fundamental role in wildlife conservation and must be part of the solution. As part of the State Wildlife Action Plans, states have identified more than 400 species of birds that are Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), with about 80 bird species per state on average -- all uniquely tailored to the state's conditions. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the action plans have identified 45 bird species in Michigan, 61 species in Ohio, and 83 species in Illinois. But, these states lack the resources needed to effectively carry out the conservation management practices their wildlife action plans have prescribed. One state noted that they have been effectively helpless to watch as long-term declines occur, which they have been able to document, but do not have the funding to be able to fully understand or counteract population losses.

Migratory birds are unique in their management, due to the nature of their migration, and also our migratory bird treaties with four nations and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act that implements these treaties. While the federal government ultimately has the lead responsibility of migratory birds due to these treaties and law, the states, territories, and tribes are critical partners, working together with NGOs, private landowners, industry, and others to advance needed conservation measures. The facts of migration require successful collaboration across all of our states and territories, and adequate funding in every state to meet the needs of birds at each life stage from breeding to wintering.

The 2019 State of the Birds report, prepared by partners of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, highlights the bird crisis and features numerous examples across the states of the benefits and needs of partnerships and state funding. These cases include the Kirtland's Warbler, addressed further below, as well as the improvement of habitat for declining Cerulean Warblers in Appalachian states, protecting nesting areas for Mountain Plovers in Colorado and Nebraska, reversing declines of American Oystercatchers on the Atlantic Coast, and more. Migratory Bird Joint Ventures have played a key role as well with this collaboration and leveraging funds to carry out conservation.

Audubon has long advocated for bipartisan, collaborative solutions to conservation challenges. When there are diverse partners at the table supporting and implementing conservation plans they have the best chances for durable success. The bipartisan and diverse coalition of supporters behind the Recovering America's Wildlife Act in front of the committee today is one of the most encouraging factors about this legislation and gives us optimism about its impact.

### **Recovering America's Wildlife Act**

Audubon would like to thank the authors of the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, including Representative Debbie Dingell and Representative Jeff Fortenberry, and the many cosponsors of the legislation. We would also like to thank the Blue Ribbon Panel that helped inspire the legislation, with leadership by Johnny Morris, Gov. Dave Freudenthal, and others including Audubon's own Glenn Olson. We are grateful for the work by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and many partners that

have advocated for the bill, and to the Committee and the Chairman for holding a hearing on the legislation.

Audubon supports the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA), because we need a bold initiative to address the crisis facing birds and other wildlife. The legislation would provide a dedicated \$1.3 billion for states, territories, and the District of Columbia, and \$97.5 million to tribes, to implement wildlife conservation plans. This dedicated and reliable funding would be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help meet the conservation needs in every part of the nation. RAWA will modernize the mechanisms of wildlife conservation and recognize that America's birds and other wildlife, and the wild places they need to survive are valued by the vast majority of Americans and they are worth investing in.

These investments in proactive conservation provide enormous value by focusing on the Species of Greatest Conservation Need in each state and territory as part of their State Wildlife Action Plans, which keeps the focus on the highest conservation priorities. Most of these species are not yet listed as threatened or endangered, but could soon be at risk of requiring further protections without conservation action. At that point, it becomes far more costly and difficult to recover species. At the same time, the bill provides a baseline level of funding for those species that have been listed, in order to help recover them more quickly.

By reducing the need to list species, the bill not only benefits wildlife, but will also have a tremendous economic impact, especially in rural communities. Habitat restoration activities cannot be outsourced – meaning that local contractors and businesses will be engaged in habitat restoration. It also benefits taxpayers, as it does not require any new taxes, but relies on existing funding.

Most importantly, this legislation will provide consistent, reliable funding to protect and restore the vital habitat that birds and other wildlife need. The funds can also support management to achieve conservation objectives, address threats from invasive species, provide greater monitoring to better understand and document population trends as well as target conservation action, and allow funding for education and recreation to build long-term appreciation for wildlife and nature. The legislation would lead to new partnerships as a result of the state match and competitive grants. And it meets the goals established by Congress, which requires states to develop their wildlife action plans and set up the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program account that has thus far remained unfunded.

The bill would provide significant benefits for birds, and for the values they provide to people. All of us benefit when populations are at healthy levels. We know that when birds thrive, people prosper. The more birds we can conserve, the more chances we all have to experience them, including through birdwatching opportunities. This is central to our 1.7 million members and 465 chapters, and the millions more residents and visitors in our country that enjoy birds. Every loss of a bird is one less bird consuming vast numbers of insect pests, and one less node in the web of life that keeps our ecosystems functioning.

This legislation will benefit many species in the Great Lakes region. This includes the Kirtland's Warbler, which nests primarily in Michigan and was recently delisted from the Endangered Species Act after a successful recovery effort. This species had declined to only 150 pairs, but thanks to strong partnerships and sufficient federal endangered species funding to support habitat management of jack pine nesting forests and reducing nest parasitism, the population has increased to more than 2,500 pairs. Maintaining and increasing their populations in Michigan and surrounding states to keep this conservation-reliant

species off of the list will depend on sufficient funding on the ground, including from state resources, and this bill could be helpful in that effort.

Other birds that would benefit in the region include the Golden-Winged Warbler – a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in 26 states across the eastern U.S. – which depends on young forest management, and is expected to face a listing determination in the next few years due to long-term declines. Henslow's Sparrow is a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in all of the Great Lakes states, and 29 states total, and depend on the protection and restoration of grassland habitats. Grassland conservation that results from this legislation will benefit other key species such as Northern Bobwhite, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, and Bobolink.

In southwest Indiana, Loggerhead Shrikes declined from 100 pairs to only 10 pairs, and depend on funding for partnerships with private landowners, which could benefit from the legislation. Additionally, marsh birds have faced significant declines in the Great Lakes region. Black Terns, for example, are a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in each of the Great Lakes states, and in 29 states total, whose population has lost 3 million birds since 1970 and face deteriorating wetland habitat that could be enhanced as a result of this bill.

We are pleased to be a part of the broad coalition of support for the legislation, including those in the business community, sportsmen groups, conservation organizations, state agencies, and more. And we were glad to see the addition of language in the legislation this Congress that added support for tribal conservation, plant conservation, and other updates.

### **Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act**

Audubon also supports H.R. 2795, the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act of 2019. While we often think of big game, wildlife migration corridors are also vital for birds that make use of these same lands to breed, winter, and migrate. Greater Sage-Grouse habitat, for instance, overlaps extensively with the Red Desert to Hoback Mule Deer Migration Corridor in Wyoming. Migrating birds flock to the same places of high protein, cover, and water that large mammals use during their migrations, just as other species share in their wealth. Protecting wildlife corridors is also a vital strategy for adapting to climate change as plant communities are shifting in elevation and location, coastal waters are warming, and coastal habitats are eroding due to sea level rise and land subsidence. Conserving, restoring, and establishing new ecological connections will facilitate the shift of species into more suitable habitat, which Audubon's new report, *Survival By Degrees: 389 Species on the Brink*, predicts will be occurring for so many bird species.

The creation of a National System of Wildlife Corridors on federal lands and waters will provide substantial benefits for birds and other wildlife. The first State of the Birds report<sup>1</sup> demonstrated the overwhelming importance of public lands and waters for sustaining the diversity of our nation's birdlife. The nation's top avian scientists from scientific and conservation organizations, and federal and state wildlife agencies came together to provide the nation's first assessment of the distribution of birds on public lands and help public agencies identify which species have significant potential for conservation in each habitat. The findings indicate tremendous potential for bird conservation: publicly owned habitats support at least half of the entire U.S. distributions of more than 300 bird species. Permitting nomination

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/2011>

of National Wildlife Corridors by State, Tribal, or local governments and nongovernmental organizations will allow for a variety of input.

At the same time, birds, like other wildlife, do not recognize boundaries and management regimes established by humans. As a result, the Act's structure supporting projects for conservation on state, Tribal and private lands is an important element of creating more opportunities for protecting corridors through collaboration and voluntary participation. Tribal Wildlife Corridors provide an important vehicle for protecting corridors on Tribal land while ensuring input and concerns of Indian tribes are prioritized.

The Wildlife Movement Grant Program is a key element for distributing funding. The National Coordination Committee, to facilitate cross-regional collaboration and establish guidelines, and the Regional Wildlife Movement Councils to prepare regional wildlife movement plans (with public involvement) and identify and rank regional priority projects for funding can help to ensure transparency and broader engagement.

Finally, the Wildlife Connectivity Database will be a useful resource to collect and share maps, models, analyses, and descriptions of habitats, wildlife movements, and corridors of native species, while protecting proprietary information and other information related to habitats and ranges of specific species in order to prevent poaching, illegal taking and trapping, and other related threats. Audubon particularly supports incorporating projected shifts in response to climate change or other environmental factors into the Database, to better inform decision-making.

*Science* recently published a long-term study of the impacts of connecting habitats. The decades-long study, titled "Ongoing accumulation of plant diversity through habitat connectivity in an 18-year experiment", concludes that the value of connectivity for biodiversity is greater than previously assessed and can be made the most of by taking action without delay. The study's conclusion that investing in connecting habitat will be a powerful tool for conserving species provides additional support for the goals of the Act. We support these goals, as well as the varying approaches taken by the Act across land management types, which we believe will assist in making the Act more workable. As an organization that works closely with landowners from forests to rangelands, we appreciate that the Act is clear that National Wildlife Corridors will only be designated on federal land or water, that private landowner participation is voluntary, and that data privacy will be addressed in the Wildlife Connectivity Database.

We look forward to ongoing discussions regarding the collaborative efforts the Act can support across different types of land management, which is the most likely way to achieve the ultimate goals of managing wildlife corridors in a way that contributes to the long-term connectivity, persistence, resilience, and adaptability of native species.

## **Conclusion**

While we support these bills as introduced, we recognize that these bills are only part of the puzzle. To address widespread threats and ensure that birds continue to provide value to our communities and grace our landscapes, we will need a broader suite of solutions. As the recent State of the Birds report documented, with the right mix of resources, partnerships, and policies, bird populations can recover.

For one, we need to address preventable bird mortality, by upholding environmental laws such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and advancing new solutions that can reduce mortality, such as the

Bird-Safe Buildings Act and the Albatross and Petrel Conservation Act. A 2018 study in *Nature* found that protecting habitat alone is not sufficient to prevent wildlife declines, but consistently enforced conservation laws were the strongest factor in preventing biodiversity loss across the globe<sup>2</sup>. We would like to thank the Chairman for holding a hearing on discussion draft legislation to reaffirm MBTA protections, and for other bills that would reinforce our environmental laws and advance conservation.

Even with the additional support provided by this legislation, wildlife conservation will remain underfunded. According to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 86% of all recovery plans for threatened and endangered species are underfunded, and the funds are not keeping pace with number of species that have required listing<sup>3</sup>. Those species are disproportionately found in a small number of states -- a conservation lift not recognized in the current Pittman-Robertson distribution formula. In Hawaii, for example, where two-thirds of its forest birds are listed under the ESA, 40% of its Species of Greatest Conservation Need are listed, compared to 2% in Alaska.

Audubon is eager to work with the committee and other stakeholders to advance some of the other bills mentioned here and to consider solutions that can provide additional wildlife protection as well as support for threatened and endangered species, especially for states that have the greatest needs.

We have a window of opportunity open in front of us now to save our natural heritage, but it's closing fast. The longer we wait to address the crisis facing birds and other wildlife, the less we will leave to our children and grandchildren. And that would be a tragic mistake. Our quality of life, the healthy functioning of our ecosystems, and our economy, will pay the price if we fail to act now. We urge you to support the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, and the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act, which will help us tackle this crisis with the bold vision that is needed.

Thank you Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and the members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would look forward to working with you and the authors of the legislation, and we would be happy to take any questions you may have.

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<sup>2</sup> Amano Tatsuya et al. Successful conservation of global waterbird populations depends on effective governance. *Nature* volume 553, pages 199–202 (11 January 2018). <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature25139>

<sup>3</sup> Gerber, Leah. "Conservation triage or injurious neglect in endangered species recovery". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113(13):201525085 · March 2016. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298330132\\_Conservation\\_triage\\_or\\_injurious\\_neglect\\_in\\_endangered\\_species\\_recovery](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298330132_Conservation_triage_or_injurious_neglect_in_endangered_species_recovery)