

Integration of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) into Southeast National Park Service Planning and Operations

J. Keith Watson, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 160 Zillicoa Street, Asheville, North Carolina 28801; keith_watson@fws.gov

Introduction

Since the creation of the U.S. Geological Survey–Biological Resources Division (USGS–BRD), the National Park Service (NPS) has had limited participation in regional, national, and international bird conservation planning efforts. The NPS personnel responsible for coordinating bird conservation before creation of the USGS-BRD were all essentially removed from this duty when transferred to USGS-BRD, reducing NPS participation in regional, national, and international bird conservation planning. However, individual efforts to promote bird conservation did continue and today, existing bird conservation efforts are largely attributed to individual park units and individuals in park units who have had support of the park superintendent or supervisor. A significant recent NPS contribution to bird conservation has been the development of the Park Flight Program (NPS 2002), a partnership between NPS, the National Park Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, American Airlines, and the U.S. Agency for International Development to facilitate bird conservation between U.S. national parks and Mesoamerican national parks. Park Flight is a great step forward in promotion of bird conservation in NPS.

Another significant NPS bird conservation initiative has been the effort to coordinate and integrate the strategies and goals of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI 2000) into the Southeast Region of NPS.

NPS is the fourth-largest landowner in the United States, managing over 380 national park units covering 3.36 million ha of land and water. The 64 units in the Southeast Region of the NPS represent 16% of the total number of park units in the National Park System and cover approximately 5% of its land base. Park Service units in the Southeast Region include national seashores (Canaveral, Cape Hatteras), national parks (Great Smoky Mountains, Everglades), national recreation areas (Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area), national preserves (Big Cypress), national battlefields (Cowpens, Fort Donelson), national monuments (Congaree Swamp, Ocmulgee), and other parks such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, Obed Wild and Scenic River, and Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. The Southeast NPS units provide habitat for over 400 species of migrating, breeding, and wintering birds, as well as

for a wide range of federally- and state-listed threatened and endangered species. There is further potential for contributions to bird conservation, through bird or habitat conservation, research, education, or a combination of these. Additionally, the National Park System attracts over 280 million visitors to the parks each year, 120 million of these in the Southeast Region, a region which affords excellent recreational bird watching and opportunities for bird conservation interpretation, outreach, and education programs.

Methods

In 1999, the Southeast Region recognized the importance of coordinating existing bird conservation goals and integrating them into the planning and operation of national park units. To support this, the Southeast Regional Office approved funding for a two-year project to coordinate and implement NABCI strategies. NPS allocated \$88,000 over the period to support the project, cost-sharing with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Region 4 (Southeast Region) to hire a bird biologist to conduct the project. Additionally, NPS wrote the interagency

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agreement that provides for technological assistance when needed. This project is unique in NPS and represents a model for regional bird conservation programs and activities in the agency.

What does “implementation of NABCI strategies” mean in NPS? As envisioned, the coordination and implementation of NABCI strategies in the Southeast Region involves:

- Developing and delivering Avian Conservation Implementation Plans (ACIPs);
- Coordinating with the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Program;
- Developing a web-based project tracking site;
- Establishing bird conservation partnerships;
- Identifying and exploring potential funding opportunities; and
- Providing technical expertise to parks as needed or requested.

Avian Conservation Implementation Plans. The ACIPs will be concise documents that describe the park’s avian resources, ongoing bird conservation efforts, and identified bird conservation projects and priorities (if any). They will also describe how the landscape of the park unit fits into greater-landscape bird conservation efforts—regionally, nationally, and, perhaps, internationally. These documents will guide the park for almost any desired bird conservation effort. The preparation of these documents will require site visits to each of the southeastern national park units and information will be gathered following a standard format and in consultation with park staff. The plans will be delivered to the park units based on the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Network (see following section). The general content of each ACIP will include:

- Introduction;
- Background;
- Status of southeastern avian resources;
- Purpose;
- Objectives;
- Park description;
- Coordination with regional conservation initiatives (how and where the park fits

into NABCI goals and strategies);

- Integration of NABCI objectives, stepped down from the existing bird conservation plans (Partners in Flight, U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, North American Waterbird Conservation Plan);
- Implementation; and
- Appendixes.

NPS Inventory and Monitoring Program. In the early 1990s, NPS embarked on a nationwide project to develop and implement an inventory and monitoring program in all parks with significant natural resources. The program was initiated in developmental phases using pilot parks. The program has been expanded to over 250 national park units and organized into networks of parks with similar resources and resource management issues. For instance, because South Florida and the Caribbean have similar natural resources, the national park units in these areas have been selected to comprise the South Florida/Caribbean Inventory and Monitoring Network. A single plan will be developed to identify the basic inventory and monitoring needs of these parks.

The Southeast Region of NPS comprises five inventory and monitoring networks: the Appalachian Highlands, Southeast Coast, South Florida/Caribbean, Cumberland/Piedmont, and Gulf Coast. To develop plans, the networks have established scoping meetings where resources indicators of park or ecosystem health are identified and considered for monitoring purposes. The project coordinator attends each network’s scoping meetings to present relevant information on bird and habitat conservation priorities for the park, region, or bird conservation planning area of interest.

Website development. A website will be developed and administered through the USFWS field office in Manteo, North Carolina. The website will describe the project and provide links to:

- Existing bird conservation initiatives and plans;
- NPS home pages (including inventory and

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- monitoring pages);
- USFWS bird conservation websites;
- ACIPs; and
- Agency contact information.

Access to agency contact information assists with the development and maintenance of partnerships between NPS, other agencies, and bird conservationists. This link will provide a database of nationwide NPS personnel contact information as well as that for key bird conservation specialists, biologists, and bird conservation coordinators. Agency contact information will be provided at five planning levels; NABCI bird conservation regions, Partners in Flight (PIF) physiographic areas, NPS regions, NPS inventory and monitoring networks, and states. Each of these planning levels will have a map, and each map designation will link to a database that provides personnel contact information. For instance, the PIF-level map will show a map of the contiguous United States and Canada, Alaska, and Hawaii, and show all designated PIF physiographic areas. Each physiographic area will have a link to the contact database. For example, if the Southern Blue Ridge physiographic area is selected, the viewer is directed to the database table of associated NPS units in that area, individual unit information (including personnel information), and other primary bird conservation contact information. The website will also have links to potential funding sources, the Park Flight Program, NPS bird checklists, and other relevant bird conservation websites.

Established partnerships. The project coordinator will work with NPS and other bird conservation partners to develop and encourage partnerships that will facilitate cooperative bird conservation efforts and projects. NPS participation in the Appalachian Yellow-bellied Sapsucker Working Group is one example.

Funding opportunities. The project coordinator will work with NPS and bird conservation partners within the existing framework of funding mechanisms to obtain funding for high priority bird conservation projects in the southeastern United States. Funding to conduct research on American

oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) in three national seashores on the Atlantic Coast has been obtained through this coordination.

Technical expertise. The project coordinator will provide technical assistance upon request and help park personnel in making the appropriate contacts with bird conservationists, partners, or other personnel to obtain the technical advice sought.

Results

Avian Conservation Implementation Plans. To date, 36 NPS units in the Southeast Region have been visited. Interviews have been conducted with staff at each of these units and information necessary to develop each ACIP has been obtained.

Three plans have been completed and 33 others are in progress. Draft ACIPs for the parks will be reviewed by park staff and their bird conservation associates to provide for an integrated implementation plan. Final copies of each ACIP will be available on the website and usually on the particular parks internet home page.

NPS Inventory and Monitoring Program. The project coordinator has participated in scoping meetings for the South Florida/Caribbean and Cumberland/Piedmont networks in the NPS Southeast Region. Bird and habitat conservation priorities for the park, region, and inventory and monitoring network landscape were presented to the network teams for consideration in their monitoring plan development. This presentation also provides the opportunity for the network, or parks within the network, to consider and potentially integrate NABCI bird conservation into their plans.

For example, in the NPS Cumberland/Piedmont Inventory and Monitoring Network, three PIF physiographic areas occur: the East Gulf Coastal Plain, the Southern Ridge and Valley, and the Northern Cumberland Plateau. Bird and habitat conservation measures identified in a draft PIF bird conservation plan were presented to the scoping meeting participants, including staff at these parks. A similar presentation was made to the South Florida/Caribbean Inventory and

Monitoring Network meeting participants.

Website development. Development of the website (southeast.fws.gov/birds/nps-birds.htm) was contracted out to a local individual and was launched in mid-July 2002.

Established partnerships. Partnerships were established between:

- NPS, USFWS, USGS–BRD, and North Carolina State University—to conduct research on American oystercatchers at Cape Hatteras, Cape Lookout, and Cumberland Island national seashores;
- NPS, USFWS, U.S. Forest Service, Eastern Band of the Cherokee, and several academic institutions—to conduct surveys for Appalachian yellow-bellied sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus varius*) in the southern Appalachians;
- NPS and the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture (NPS became an official member);
- Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout national seashores—as participants in the International Shorebird Survey and website entry into the South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative (SAMBI);
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park and USFWS—to manage landscape at “The Purchase” to improve habitat for the golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*); and
- Canaveral National Seashore and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge—to share resources to accomplish management and protection of two federally listed species.

Funding opportunities. USFWS submitted a proposal and received funding for research on the American oystercatcher at Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout national seashores. A summary of funding opportunities outside the normal annual funding call of NPS has been prepared and will be available on the website. North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant program information was submitted to the NPS Southeast Region’s associate regional director for resource stewardship and science for transmission to park units.

Technical expertise. Technical support and guidance is an on-going activity.

Discussion

The integration and coordination of NABCI goals into the Southeast Region of NPS represents a unique approach to incorporation of bird conservation goals into an agency’s planning and operations. Reviewing the situation approximately midway through this project, significant and enthusiastic cooperation has been given by NPS. From the regional directorship down to the park resource manager and volunteer, NPS has welcomed and encouraged this project and is excited to become a more active participant in southeastern bird conservation. Following completion and delivery of the ACIPs to southeastern parks, the next phase will be transferring the conceptual and tactical strategies described in the plans into partnerships, funding opportunities, and projects that will translate into bird and habitat conservation. Once fully embraced and incorporated into agency operations and planning, the ACIPs for parks in the Southeast Region will enable NPS to “deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships under the North American Bird Conservation Initiative.”

Acknowledgments

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