



**Review of Progress  
on the  
North American Bird Conservation  
Initiative**

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## Executive Summary

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), launched by the CEC in 1999, is now accepted as the most effective approach for the conservation of all birds in all habitats in North America. As requested last year by the Council, this report offers a review of NABCI's progress since 1999 in terms of institutional changes, development of the science base and delivery of on-the-ground actions.

The institutional mechanisms are now largely in place to ensure long-term support for NABCI, both domestically and trinationally. National committees have been formally established to guide NABCI in each country, and a trinational committee has been developed to help facilitate and coordinate trinational actions for bird conservation. Three NABCI national coordinators support the work of these committees. The NABCI approach has also significantly influenced the way key institutions establish their funding priorities for national and trinational projects.

Common North American frameworks for the assessment of priorities, conservation planning, the distribution of birds, monitoring and evaluation have been developed, or are evolving. Key products include the map of bird conservation regions; a database of the ranges of all birds and maps based on it that result from protocols common to all three countries; and a network of Important Bird Areas in all three countries.

In Canada and the United States, NABCI has worked with existing partnerships to address the needs of all birds and in Mexico, intensive work has been carried out on the basis of the IBA network in order to set conditions for the implementation of the first group of trinational NABCI projects later this year. In the Sonoran Desert and the Lower Great Lakes–St Lawrence Plain ecoregions, NABCI partners on both sides of the borders have joined forces to develop common conservation plans to address the needs of all birds.

The NABCI approach has become a unifying element for bird conservation planning, prioritization and implementation in all three countries. Without the support provided by the CEC, progress would have been much slower and the recognition of the importance of fully integrating the needs of all birds in all three countries would probably be absent. Today, the institutional base established through NABCI has the potential of increasing the effectiveness of CEC programs and initiatives and fostering greater cooperation among the nations and peoples of the continent.

## Introduction

Birds are the most visible component of the biological diversity of North America. More than a thousand species of birds are found in Canada, Mexico and the United States, and many of them use habitats in several countries during their annual migratory cycle. Due to their visibility, ubiquitous distribution and responsiveness, birds can serve both as a flagship for the conservation of all biodiversity, and as an indicator of the health of the continent's ecosystems. Over the past century, however, the populations of many birds have declined significantly, to the point that regional extirpation or overall extinction looms as a potential likelihood for a number of species.

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In response, the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Council of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (Banff, Alberta, Canada, 28 June 1999) supported the launch of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) in Council Resolution 99-03 as an innovative approach for the conservation all birds in all habitats. NABCI is today one of the only fora in North America that brings together governments, nongovernmental organizations, and the citizens of Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

NABCI is about protecting, restoring and enhancing populations and habitats of North America's birds through coordinated efforts at international, national, regional and local levels, guided by sound science and effective management. This is being accomplished through regionally based, biologically driven, habitat-oriented partnerships delivering the full spectrum of bird conservation across the entirety of the North American continent. This innovative and integrative approach is seen as having the greatest promise of maintaining or restoring healthy populations of all of the native birds of the continent. Beyond our collective responsibility for the maintenance of biological diversity, there is an increasing continent-wide recognition of the social and economic benefits of healthy populations of birds—for food, pest control, sport, bird watching, among others—and that they must be managed sustainably. That recognition is reflected in the increasing interest of the Environment Ministers of the Americas in the development of a hemispheric strategy to enhance the conservation and use of migratory species throughout the Americas, beginning with migratory birds (Ministerial Communiqué, Meeting of the Environment Ministers of the Americas, 29–30 March, 2001). The institutional base established through NABCI can support integrated, on-the-ground delivery of a variety of programs for the conservation of biodiversity as well as for all birds.

Last year, the Council further supported the work being done within the North American Bird Conservation Initiative and requested a progress report at their next annual meeting (Final Communiqué for the Eighth Regular Session of the Council of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Guadalajara, Mexico, 29 June 2001). This report reviews the progress that has been made since 1999 in terms of institutional changes, development of the science base and delivery of on-the-ground actions for the conservation of the birds of North America.

### **Institutional Changes**

The delivery of integrated bird conservation efforts required a new institutional framework to facilitate dialogue and coordination among government and nongovernmental groups. Institutional changes have been the clearest examples of the favorable impact NABCI has had within the last three years. This has involved some fundamental changes in the way many current organizations functioned, as well as their expansion, and the development of new structures. Many of the changes were catalyzed through the support provided by the CEC, building upon the strong commitment of the

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three governments as well as all NABCI partners. Overall, the institutional mechanisms are now in place, or are evolving, to ensure long-term support for NABCI, both domestically and trinationally. Moreover, the degree of institutional response achieved thus far suggests that NABCI can already offer a potential model for promoting regional integrated bird conservation throughout the continent as a whole as well as for other regions of the world.

### **National development**

National committees have been formally established to guide NABCI in each country and represent the highest level of decision-making structure within NABCI. Each of the committees includes membership of some of the most influential members of the conservation community in that country. So far, national committees have become effective fora for the discussion of structural, procedural and substantive needs and opportunities related to national and regional integrated bird conservation.

The structure of NABCI responds to the needs of each country. In the case of Mexico, the Comité Directivo Nacional—ICAN México is composed of 12 members representing federal, nongovernmental environmental and academic interests. The United States NABCI Committee is composed of 13 members, representing federal, state and nongovernmental environmental interests, as well as each of the four bird initiatives (waterfowl, shorebirds, waterbirds and landbirds). The NABCI Canada Council is composed of 30 members representing federal, provincial/territorial and both environmental and industry nongovernmental interests, as well as the four bird initiatives. The coordination work within and among the three national committees has been greatly enhanced with the presence of the NABCI national coordinators, hired since 1999, with the partial support from the CEC.

### **Trinational development**

Complementing the functions of the national committees, a NABCI Trinational Committee has been developed to help facilitate and coordinate trinational actions for bird conservation. This committee is composed of representatives of the three national committees. As a means to strengthen the trinational institutional capacity and extend the breadth of NABCI to other countries of the Continent, the national committees, in close collaboration with the Executive Table of the Trilateral Committee, have been involved in drafting a “Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of North American Birds and their Habitats.” This non-binding agreement is to be presented for ministerial signature within the next few months.

International conferences have been held explicitly to address NABCI issues. The CEC has helped organize the most notable of these, the two Trinational Meetings of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, NABCI-I and II, held in Puebla and Querétaro, Mexico, in 1998 and 2001, respectively. Over 120 participants from the three countries used these meetings to develop and promote the concept of NABCI. Furthermore, the number of organizations embracing the NABCI approach is growing

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rapidly as was evident in the recent Third International Partners In Flight Conference: A Workshop on Bird Conservation Implementation and Integration, Monterey, California, 20–24 March 2002. Over 620 participants from Canada, Mexico, the United States and Latin America attended to work on effective approaches to conservation of all birds and to forge international partnerships for future action.

Finally, the NABCI approach has also significantly influenced the way key institutions establish their funding priorities for national and trinational projects. For instance, within the United States, guidelines for scoring projects under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act have been adjusted to more easily address the needs of wetland birds other than waterfowl. Additionally, a Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act has been passed to address more directly the needs of migratory birds in Latin America. Also, the structure of some of the working committees of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (members include the fish and wildlife agencies of the states, provinces, and federal governments of Canada, Mexico and the US) has been adjusted to better address all bird issues.

## **Science**

One important accomplishment emanating from the vision of NABCI has been a greatly improved scientific basis for bird conservation with full trinational participation. A strong biological foundation leads to sound decisions regarding target species and sites, landscape design and conservation actions. It strengthens the platform for planning, communications, integration, and implementation. Such a foundation is based on an understanding of vital demographic rates and their causes, particularly the relationship between population phenomena and landscape patterns and change.

A mark of the success of NABCI is not just the advancement of the science of bird conservation, but also the collective, international means by which this is being accomplished. Of paramount importance is the improved capacity in Mexico, where historically both the knowledge base and capacity for building a programmatic approach to bird conservation science have lagged behind the other two countries, but where in contrast the integrated view for biodiversity conservation has dominated the overall work for more than a decade. Some concrete accomplishments in building a common North American framework for the assessment of priorities, conservation planning and evaluation follow.

### **Common framework**

In order to plan, implement and evaluate conservation actions across the whole of North America, a common framework was needed. NABCI partners, supported by the CEC, developed a common, ecologically based set of ‘ecoregions’ appropriate to birds throughout North America. These Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) were based on the ‘ecoregions’ previously developed in 1997 by the CEC (see figure 1). The BCRs now provide the bird conservation community with a convenient scale for priority setting,

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planning, and evaluation. BCRs are a good example of the geographic focus and international spirit of NABCI, as they create a tool useful for the many different approaches to bird conservation in all three countries.



Figure 1. Ecoregions, left, and Bird Conservation Regions, right. Sources. CEC, 1997 and BSC <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/international/bcrmain.html>, respectively.

### Priority setting

Resolving the complex issue of setting conservation priorities was a key need of NABCI partners. A sophisticated process and common database to help access the conservation status of all birds in all three countries has been established and is being guided by the Trilateral Committee. Maps of the ranges of all birds in North America are currently being placed in a common database. A set of updated maps of the distribution of all Mexican birds is under development, partially supported by the CEC, and will be included in the common database. Continued inventory work will elucidate patterns within ranges and provide improved information for decision makers.

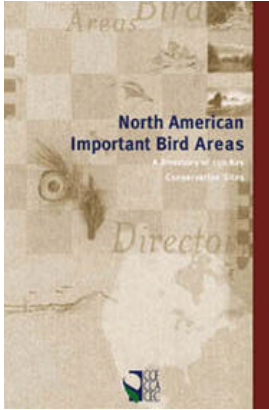
### Conservation planning

Once knowledge is established of which birds need help in which areas, the next questions revolve around identifying needs of those priority species. The primary cause of population declines in birds is often loss or reduction in quality of habitat. Knowing which types of habitat are used by a priority species and what the characteristics are of that habitat are critical components of conservation.

In many areas of the United States and southern Canada, NABCI partners have developed bird conservation plans that include identifying priority species, describing the needs of those priority species, analyzing current conditions relevant to those birds, population objectives, and formulating recommendations on how to manage habitat to

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achieve those objectives. Although some of these plans address only one group of birds, fully integrated, landscape-level plans have been implemented in some regions (e.g., the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, the Prairie Potholes, and parts of the Southeastern Coastal Plain) and are under active development in others (e.g., the Lower Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Plain and the Central Hardwoods).



Knowing which geographical locations are particularly important to a bird species or a group of species is an essential component of conservation planning. A network of Important Bird Areas (IBAs), based on international criteria, has been identified in all three countries. The CEC published the first set of descriptions for these IBAs; now they have expanded to an extensive network. IBAs are a focus for conservation actions in all three countries, but this is especially true in Mexico where they are the backbone for the implementation of NABCI, because they represent *in situ* conservation through the “all bird approach.”

### Evaluation

When conservation action is taken, it is assumed that target populations will respond favorably. This needs to be tested, both for site-specific population response as well as for continental-level changes. Evaluation frameworks are being developed by the bird conservation initiatives and the implementation partnerships. These depend, in part, on population and habitat monitoring; therefore, monitoring plans for bird populations in all three countries must be continuously strengthened and expanded to assist in evaluating the results of conservation actions.

### Delivery

The NABCI approach is now firmly part of the North American bird conservation community agenda. Its vision has permeated all the principal bird conservation programs and become a unifying element for conservation planning, prioritization and implementation in all three countries. This effect has also greatly contributed to fostering and improving communications among programs, partners, and institutions—both nationally and internationally.

Delivery can be conceived as social and institutional change for addressing a common goal, as well as on-the-ground implementation. The role of NABCI is enabling rather than competitive. Effective delivery of bird conservation programs within and among countries depends on the institutional arrangements and a sound knowledge base. Consequently, the delivery of the NABCI vision is only now beginning throughout the three countries. We fully expect that the rate of trilateral, on-the-ground delivery will increase substantially in upcoming years.



## **National**

Domestically, in Canada and the United States, many of the Joint Ventures (JV) (regional partnerships) established under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) have initiated planning and project activities to address explicitly the needs of birds other than waterfowl within their geographic area. Some of the best examples in the United States are the Lower Mississippi Valley JV, the Prairie Pothole JV and the South Atlantic Coast JV—which have developed detailed landscape-level conservation plans integrating the needs of all birds and which have then implemented a series of projects to address those needs. In Canada, the Canadian Intermountain JV has been established in the intermountain west, an area not previously covered by a NAWMP JV, and has been designed to address the needs of all birds, as well as the needs of endangered species on the same landscape. In Mexico, intensive work has been carried out on the basis of the IBA network in order to set conditions for the implementation of the first group of trinational NABCI projects later this year. However, domestic action alone will not meet the needs of NABCI.

## **International**

One of the most exciting prospects facing the three nations is that of Trinational NABCI Projects. This concept, which arose out of the NABCI-II workshop in Querétaro, is intended to address species of birds and conservation needs shared among sites in each of the three countries. The base for a Trinational NABCI Project lies in Mexico. A thorough analysis by a broad group of Mexican partners, based on the highest priority Important Bird Areas and the characteristics desired in all three countries in such projects, has resulted in identification of six initial areas: Marismas Nacionales (Nayarit-Sinaloa), Chamela-Cuixmala (Jalisco), El Triunfo (Chiapas), northeastern Yucatán peninsula (Ria Lagartos in Yucatán and Cozumel, and Sian Ka'an in Quintana Roo), El Cielo (Tamaulipas), and the grasslands the Chihuahuan Desert (see figure 2). Joint Ventures and other partnerships in the US and Canada will be provided opportunities to form multiple links with these sites, based initially on shared migratory birds. NABCI national coordinators, supported by national and trinational committees and the CEC, are working intensively with partners to ensure the launching of the first group of trinational NABCI projects by the end of this year. There have already been indications that a variety of funding sources will find such linked trinational NABCI projects extremely attractive.

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Figure 2. Highest priority Important Bird Areas in Mexico, according to NABCI-Mexico (work in progress).

Because populations of birds do not respect political boundaries, even when not migrating, many of the ecosystems that sustain them seasonally straddle national boundaries. In those cases, NABCI partners on both sides of the border have joined forces to develop common conservation plans to address the needs of birds. This has been a challenging exercise, given the diversity of interests and political infrastructures, but the partners remain committed to coordinating their actions based on the needs of the birds, rather than traditional, more parochial approaches. The following successful binational efforts represent the dawn of an era of international ecoregional cooperation.

The Sonoran Desert Joint Venture, covering much of southwestern US and northwestern Mexico, is the first binational JV created explicitly to deliver conservation all birds in all habitats. The region supports several of the bird species identified as being of common conservation concern by the Canada-US-Mexico Trilateral Committee for Wildlife and Ecosystem Conservation and Management and is a nexus of migratory pathways for North America. The JV is at work on an implementation plan and is simultaneously building partnerships on both sides of the border and triggering numerous on-the-ground projects.

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The Lower Great Lakes–St Lawrence Plain ecoregion lies in one of the more densely populated and economically important regions of North America and covers parts of four US states and two Canadian provinces. It is also notable for its biodiversity and for the presence of a high proportion of Canada's ecosystems and species-at-risk. It has been shown repeatedly that whether an environmental event occurs on the Canadian or the United States portion of this BCR, the impact will inevitably be felt on both sides. Thus, the Eastern Habitat, Atlantic Coast and Upper Mississippi Joint Ventures were very conscious of sharing a common cause, and from this awareness have grown a determination to coordinate biological planning, information exchange and joint action priorities. The purpose was not to create a new joint venture, but to reshape the working relationship between existing ones and enhance their collective effectiveness in achieving NABCI goals.

True trilateral efforts, with coordinated actions in all three countries, have been slower to develop than the national actions. One notable example is the CEC Grasslands Initiative, based initially upon grassland species of common conservation concern. This effort promises to help address broad biodiversity concerns, including birds, of all three nations within the central North American grasslands.

Communications is key to the success of NABCI, and the Trilateral Committee has recognized this through completion of a Trilateral Communications Strategy. The strategy identifies target audiences and works on crafting messages at a trilateral scale that will continue to enhance the international effectiveness of NABCI. Since 1999, CEC has sponsored a web site <[www.nabci.org](http://www.nabci.org)> to facilitate communications among NABCI partners.

## **Conclusions**

Over the past 15 years, bird conservation in North America has made a major shift towards the use of regionally based partnerships, sound science and effective management. The progress toward that goal was very uneven—both as applied to different populations of birds and between countries. A number of individuals and organizations have promoted a more integrated approach to conservation of all birds throughout North America, but there was little progress. It was the attention of the CEC that gave the impetus for the results that we see today. Without CEC involvement, which has helped to create the institutional framework, progress would have been much slower and there would not have been the recognition of the need to integrate fully the needs of all birds in all three countries.

### **Institutional**

Institutional mechanisms have been put in place, or are evolving, to ensure long-term support for NABCI—both domestically and trilaterally—and to provide a secure platform for the delivery of conservation programs. The NABCI concept has stimulated a

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broader, more collaborative focus of the existing bird conservation programs in the three countries and is playing a prime role for planning, implementation and trinational cooperation, as well as for improving communication within and among countries and conservation programs.

### **Science**

Although more work is needed on the scientific basis for bird conservation, there has been a significant increase in cooperation among the varied bird interests and a commitment to seeing that the needs of all three countries are addressed. NABCI is building a strong biological foundation for bird conservation—a prerequisite to sound decision-making regarding target species and sites, conservation actions, and anticipated results.

### **Delivery**

There has been considerable action within all three countries to address the needs of all birds through on-the-ground habitat conservation, education and outreach. Although a great deal is being accomplished, much of the action is still focused on wetland habitats and more effort is needed in forests, deserts, mountains and grasslands. Support for the integrated trinational projects is especially needed as those efforts have the greatest potential to simultaneously support a programmatic approach to bird and biodiversity conservation in Mexico (and ultimately in North America), to recognize the socioeconomic needs of communities in all three countries and to address the conservation needs of our shared populations of birds.

### **The Future**

Today, there is increased recognition that birds are indicators of ecosystem health and, ultimately, of human health. Moreover, healthy populations of birds offer social and economic benefits and can serve as a flagship for the conservation of all biodiversity. The institutional basis established through NABCI (regionally-based, biologically-driven, habitat-oriented partnerships, delivering the full spectrum of bird conservation across the North American continent) can become a key vehicle and platform supporting the three North American countries in their efforts toward integrated, long-term, on-the-ground biodiversity conservation programs, as well as for those directed at birds. NABCI offers a high potential to become an integrative vehicle for CEC programs conducive to a better understanding of shared environmental issues. This initiative has therefore become one of the best trinational mechanisms to increase the effectiveness of bird and biodiversity-related conservation programs and initiatives, and foster greater cooperation among the nations and peoples throughout the continent.