



NEWS RELEASE

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ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT SUCCESSES RECOUNTED **AS ADJUNCT TO INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY**

As Americans celebrate International Migratory Bird Day May 11, they can be heartened by the success of the Endangered Species Act: nearly 50 of the 90 U.S. birds classified as either endangered or threatened are either stable or increasing in number.

"Birds are such a part of our daily life--we see them and watch them every day--that we sometimes take them for granted until that day when we suddenly realize they are gone. No one will ever again see a passenger pigeon or a Santa Barbara song sparrow. They are extinct. Today should give us pause to reflect on all that birds mean to us," said Mollie Beattie, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Beattie noted that the American bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and brown pelican are examples of birds that are well on their way to recovery, while the California condor and the whooping crane are encouraging examples of how species can be rescued from the brink of extinction.

- o Twenty-five years ago, the bald eagle was in danger of extinction throughout most of its range. Habitat loss, illegal shooting, and a contaminated food chain took the bird from an estimated population of 25,000 to 75,000 nesting eagles in 1782, when the bird was adopted as the national symbol, to fewer than 450 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states by the 1960s.

Banning the pesticide DDT, which caused eggshells to thin and break before hatching, played a major role in the eagle's recovery, along with the added protection and recovery efforts under the Endangered Species Act. Today, eagles have rebounded to more than 4,500 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states and their comeback led the Service to reclassify the bird in 1995 from endangered to threatened.

- o The peregrine falcon, a bird never highly abundant in the United States, was likewise seriously affected by the ingestion of DDT. In the 1930s and 1940s, the peregrine population was estimated at about 500 breeding pairs in the eastern United States and about 1,000 pairs in the West and

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in Mexico. By the mid-1960s, the bird had been eliminated from nearly all of the eastern U.S. and the decline was spreading westward. Following restrictions on the use of DDT and concerted recovery and reintroduction efforts, there are now about 1,200 breeding pairs of peregrine falcons in the lower 48 states and Alaska and the Service is considering removing the bird from the list of threatened and endangered species.

- o The brown pelican has few natural enemies; their biggest threats have come from man. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pelicans were hunted for their feathers, which were used to adorn women's clothing and hats. Following World War I, fishermen, convinced pelicans were decimating catches, slaughtered the birds by the thousands; by the 1940s, DDT became the newest threat. Eventually, studies showed that pelicans were not harming commercial fisheries and in 1970 the birds were listed as an endangered species. Pelicans began to recover following the 1972 ban on DDT and the Atlantic Coast population was removed from the endangered list in 1985, although the birds remain listed as endangered in the U.S. Gulf and Pacific coasts.
- o An estimated 500 to 1,400 whooping cranes inhabited North America in 1870. Habitat loss and shooting took a heavy toll on whooping cranes during the settlement of the West; one of two flocks that remained was devastated when a hurricane hit Louisiana in 1940. The whooping crane does not reach breeding maturity until the age of 4 and then produces two eggs; only a single offspring, however, normally survives. Consequently, the species is less capable of a quick recovery from any appreciable population loss.

The tallest bird in North America at 5 feet, and with a wingspan of 7 feet, the whooping crane was declared endangered in 1967. Since then, the Service has conducted an ambitious captive breeding and recovery program. Nesting sites are now protected in Canada and the United States. The success of the Service whooping crane program has led to the program's adoption by countries seeking to protect other crane species.

- o The California condor may have started its long decline as early as the 1890s. By the late 1970s, there were 25 to 30 remaining in the wild but by 1985, the number had dwindled to fewer than a dozen. In 1987, the Service removed the last condor from the wild after 4 of 5 breeding pairs disappeared. While no single event has been identified as the reason for the condor's decline, shrinking natural habitat undoubtedly played a part as condors prefer huge

open areas in which to hunt for food. Condors and their eggs were also illegally collected over the years. Some succumbed to poison and others were killed in collisions with power lines.

The 25-pound birds have a wingspan of 9 1/2 feet and may not start breeding until they are 7 or 8 years of age; even then, condors will produce only a single egg every other year. A fledgling is dependent upon its parents through the next breeding season. Today, however, thanks to an energetic captive-breeding and reintroduction program, there are 104 condors in existence; 17 are living in the wild and the remainder in breeding facilities. A search for appropriate habitat goes on, including a proposal to reintroduce the bird into the Grand Canyon, and the outlook for this giant creature is more promising today than it was just 5 years ago.

"International Migratory Bird Day is a good time to reflect on how birds contribute to all facets of our national life," Beattie said. "They are vital creatures. Birds contribute to the economy. They are useful. They are the balance wheel that keeps the insect world from overwhelming people. They are endlessly fascinating to watch and they accent the seasons in wonderful ways. The national symbol of the United States is a bird. The choice was not an accident."

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