

WELCOMING • NEOTROPICAL • MIGRANTS • BACK What We Can Do At Home

▀ Rich Stallcup

Not only politically—on a state and national scale—but also individually on a community or backyard scale—we can all contribute to conservation efforts for songbirds. This “action checklist” is authored by Rich Stallcup, an outstanding field ornithologist, author, educator, and columnist for the PRBO Observer.

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Given the environmental news we hear these days—global warming, ozone holes, acid rain, oil spills, forest clearing, poisoning, poaching, drought, disease, and famine—it's sometimes hard to keep a cheerful attitude about the future of world wildlife. But buck up, because there is lots of good news, too, and a growing number of people are joining action campaigns to deal with nature's adversaries. Together we are a powerful voice for the little-life that can't speak for itself. Here are some things you can do at home, as a citizen member of Partners In Flight for neotropical migratory birds.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

Educate Yourself. Join a conservation group (like National Audubon Society, the Native Plant Society, or Sierra Club), or become active if you already belong. Go to meetings. Seek out the conservation director. Learn what's going on in your area, who owns the best local woodlands and wetlands, and if the lands are protected or protectable. Imagine what other projects might be helpful.

A feral house cat stalks a Winter Wren.

TIM MANOLIS

Revegetate your neighborhood or parkland.

TIM MANOLIS



Write to Public Agencies. Write to local, state, and federal politicians; to game wardens, park superintendents, and agency personnel. When nature is about to suffer a blow in their jurisdiction, let them know that you and your friends stand for wildlife—especially for pristine nesting habitat for migratory songbirds (excellent for all other native fauna and flora, too). Maintaining passerine habitat while managing for pheasants and geese can be easy and economical, and our public landowners may be more inclined to do so if they know there is public concern. Planting riparian woodland in places where it has been removed during flood control operations is always a good place to start. (Consider joining The Nature Conservancy, which outright buys vulnerable habitat.)

Declare Your Yard A Wildlife Refuge. No matter where or how big your yard is, with a little thought and care it can

be an important habitat patch for birds. Plant for wildlife, using mostly native species, and provide water for birds. *An Illustrated Guide to Attracting Birds* (Sunset Publishing) gives regional plant lists and discusses feeders and baths. Remember that songbirds need thick low vegetation as well as tall trees. Water should be fresh and clean. Still water, such as that in a bird bath, is helpful, but more birds will be attracted and benefit if the water is dripping, spraying, or trickling.

TOP PRIORITIES

Protect Remaining Woodland. While large tracts of unmolested “old-growth” coniferous and deciduous forest are crucial to some kinds of birds for nesting, every twig on every tree in riparian woodland is crucial to many more. In the willows, alders, aspen, sycamore, cottonwood, and related understory that grow along the edges of rivers and streams, the species diversity and number of nesting pairs of birds is greater than in any other temperate habitat. Oaks, too, because of their acorns and their attraction to insects, are vital to a huge volume of birdlife, and every effort should be made to save them.

Revegetate. Consider organizing your club, society, scout troop, church group, or neighborhood to plant and maintain native flora to replace some of what has been removed. In many places in California, this will mean oaks, which have not had a chance to reproduce because every acorn that hit the ground during the past 125 years has been chomped by cattle. There may also be chances to regrow some riparian habitat (every tree helps) where it has been cleared or flooded out for flood control. In some places, planting native grasses has been successful, and some day public agencies will want to “farm” native grassland while managing for threatened vertebrates.

Be sure to plant only the exact species formerly present in each area, and garden them through the first winter or summer. The greatest opportunities may be for work on public land (with permission), but ranchers also might choose native oak-savannah over brown Eurasian grasses, if only for erosion control.

Believe In Trees. Houses built *within* woodlands can be much nicer places to live than ones built *on* woodlands. Human housing and productive nesting habitat for migratory birds need not be mutually exclusive. Developers and architects can be more nature-friendly by drawing plans that accommodate trees already grow-

The Marvel of Migration from page 3

ing, not cutting down trees that hinder a blueprint. Riparian groves should remain untouched by housing developments, unless by planting to enhance them.

STATE & FEDERAL EFFORTS

Support Cowbird Control Programs. Cowbirds are "brood parasites" that lay eggs in the nests of other species, usually at the expense of the foster parents' offspring. The abundance and spread of cowbirds in North America (see *PRBO Observer* 95) have greatly reduced populations of several neotropical migrant species and threaten many more. Cowbird removal from certain nesting locales has resulted in recovery of some endangered birds, but recovery is temporary unless cowbird removal is perpetual. The removal of one flock in fall-winter (when highly gregarious cowbirds congregate in huge single-species roosts) could result in millions more young warblers, flycatchers, tanagers, and vireos the following spring. If you hear of a well planned cowbird control operation, easily accomplished by agency personnel, please support it.

Support Programs to Expel Feral Cats From Wildlife Habitats. In many areas, even parks and wildlife refuges, feral cats far outnumber *all* native predators. They kill large numbers of small animals, wreaking havoc on local populations. To keep nature balanced, managers of public lands should remove alien cats whenever they are detected. Unfortunately, some people are only able to think of feral cats as cuddly pets. There is no doubt that these animals kill many millions of native songbirds every year. Please support and encourage programs to neuter and/or remove cats from nature.

Remember, each of us can speak and act for wildlife and fertile native ecosystems. Support wild land protection and restoration, support monitoring research, communication, and education programs, and support lower human resource consumption and population growth. Get involved in Partners In Flight, through volunteer opportunities like those listed on the inside back cover or initiatives of your own.

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consistently important feeding areas for birds that have crossed or will cross major ecological barriers—oceans, mountains, deserts, etc.

We also know that while birds that migrate vast distances over major ecological barriers often accumulate large fat stores to fuel nonstop flights, many other species migrate shorter distances or are not forced to cross major ecological barriers. The migratory strategy associated with these birds involves more stopping and refueling along the way rather than loading up for a major flight. For this group, especially well represented in western North America including California, habitat along the migratory route may be critically important. In some cases, this habitat may be a narrow riparian corridor, a city park, a desert oasis or a clump of trees in your backyard. Studies of Pacific Slope Flycatchers, captured in a central California riparian corridor barely 100 feet wide, showed that they lingered during migration an average of four days on the site and gained

an average of one gram. Some individuals gained as much as three grams (30% of their arrival weight) in body weight before continuing their journey. Additionally, birds arriving with relatively low body weights tended to put on more weight than those arriving with greater body weights. This refueling process is much the same for other western migrants and points out the necessity for habitats—even less than pristine ones—to support the miracle of migration.

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"Because cowbird chicks hatch earlier and grow faster, they usually crowd out or starve out the host young. Studies of vireos and phoebes revealed that parents rearing a cowbird fledged only half as many young as their unparasitized neighbors."

from *Birds Over Troubled Forests*, Smithsonian

"Wilson's Warblers raising a cowbird chick."

KEITH HANSEN

"Miniature Rufous Hummingbirds in their determined ridgecrest flights."

TIM MAXSON

