

Here's what Birdlife International has to say about IBAs:

"Important Bird Areas are part of a larger network of key biodiversity areas — the most important sites for terrestrial biodiversity conservation worldwide. Key biodiversity areas form the anchors of a systematic ecological network. Like IBAs, they are identified based on the species they hold. We generally have good data on the status and distribution of bird species. However, the information for many other species is poor or patchy, often making it hard to identify the critical sites for these species.

There is growing evidence that networks of IBAs, though identified using information on birds, are disproportionately important for other animals and plants. That is to say, IBA networks are good at capturing threatened, endemic and representative species for other terrestrial groups...It appears that IBAs can be used

with confidence as a first cut for the overall network of key biodiversity areas, with extra sites for other taxa being added when data become available."

This correlation has proven to hold up in sites ranging in size from the expansive savannas of East Africa to small islands of habitat found in or near major urban areas.

In the United States, the National Audubon Society became Birdlife International's partner, beginning the IBA initiative in 1995 and working to set up the program in each state. The individual state focus of the program provides local conservationists with both the tools and the opportunity to protect sites within their state, allowing them to tailor the definition and criteria to suit local conditions.

Important shorebird stopovers are included on the IBA list.

Eric Walters photographed these Willets near West Salem, Edwards County. 30 April 2005.



How does it work?

The broad qualifications for site designation require that at least one of the four following criteria are met:

The site must be utilized by a species of conservation concern (threatened or endangered species).

The site must be used by a restricted range species (vulnerable because of limited distribution).

The species using the site has its populations concentrated in only one habitat type.

The site is used by a species (or groups of similar species like shorebirds or waterfowl) vulnerable because they congregate at the site in high concentrations.

A detailed nomination form, setting out specific standards for data collection and submission, is available from Audubon. It allows the nominator to define the site step by step, focusing on the necessary observations and data to support the nomination. Once completed, the

form and any attached information are reviewed by the Illinois IBA Technical Committee, which is co-chaired by Jim Herkert and Judy Pollock. Committee members are Steve Bailey, Jeff Brawn, Vern Kleen, Doug Stotz, Liane Suloway, Jeff Walk and Mike Ward. All the nomination materials also are entered into the World Bird Database, developed and maintained by Bird Life International.

Implicit to the nomination process is working with the landowner/manager. In most cases, the designation is an endorsement of the way the area is being managed, since good stewardship is critical for long-term viability of an IBA site. On very rare occasions, seeking and obtaining IBA status may be one tool for those seeking to save a critical area from some form of development or major alteration. Usually, but not always, a designation ceremony will take place at a new IBA site, celebrating the status and

giving all the interested parties a chance to talk about the future.

State of the State: Where are we right now regarding Illinois IBAs?

Illinois has 48 IBAs. They range in size from fewer than 100 to thousands of acres. Table 1 lists all the sites and shows the species or suite of species that were the reason for IBA designation.

The geographic concentration of sites is worth noting. Almost 25% (11 out of 48) are near the Shawnee National Forest in the extreme southern end of Illinois. This birding hot spot region is (not surprisingly) a critical area for many of Illinois' most threatened species. The Illinois River valley is also an IBA hot spot, with 12 (13 counting the DesPlaines State Conservation Area near the confluence of the several rivers that form the Illinois). These IBAs reflect the importance of the Illinois River valley as a