



Bird Conservation Network: Working in Concert with Habitat Restorationists

by Judy Pollock

The Bird Conservation Network began in the fall of 1996 as a small group of bird conservationists from various northeastern Illinois birding organizations who were concerned about whether habitat restoration decisions were taking into account the needs of local bird populations. Brush removal in Cherry Hill Forest Preserve, a shrubland habitat in Cook County that attracted breeding Yellow-breasted Chat and Blue-winged Warbler, brought the growing concerns of some birders to a head. Alan Anderson, Chicago Audubon Society's research chair and longtime bird conservationist, helped organize a meeting to discuss ways to educate ourselves about the restoration process and develop better ways to bring birders' knowledge into conservation decision-making.

We decided to begin by educating ourselves with a conference, and quickly organized more formally, meeting with public officials and conservation groups. Chicago Audubon Society graciously agreed to take our mail and phone messages. Terry Schilling, our treasurer, got us organized with by-laws, non-profit status, and a bank account. We developed a vision and a way of operating: we strove to be a democratic and inclusive organization that would serve as a point of contact in the birding community for bird conservation issues.

Four years later, the Bird Conservation Network has become a thriving coalition of 16 birding and conservation organizations in Northeastern Illinois, with a mission of conserving bird habitat. Our members include Chicago Audubon Society; Chicago Ornithological Society; Chicagoland Bird Observatory; DuPage Audubon; DuPage Birding Club; Evanston-North Shore Bird Club; Fort Dearborn Chapter, Illinois Audubon Society; Kane County Audubon; Lake-Cook Chapter, Illinois Audubon Society; the National Audubon Society Chicago Wilderness Program; Park Ridge Audubon; The Nature Conservancy Bird Committee; Thorn Creek Audubon; Will County Audubon; and our newest member, the Illinois Ornithological Society.

Much of our most fruitful work has been in partnerships with such organizations as Chicago Wilderness, the Field Museum, and Friends of the Forest Preserves. We work to bring the best scientific advisors' perspectives to conservation projects and the public. We have offered two conferences, one in 1997, Birds and Habitat Management, and another in 1999 on migratory bird habitat.

An ongoing project is the BCN Census monitoring program conducted by the region's birders who record their results on a web-based database housed at the Field Museum. (<http://www.fmnh.org/birdcensus>>www.fmnh.org/birdcensus). Participants and coordinators work in five Chicagoland counties. Three protocols range in difficulty from a simple checklist of birds seen to a regular point count. Every birder can participate. Monitors who work in restoration areas belong to the Volunteer Stewardship Network. Coming soon is a site integrated with Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's BirdSource. Users will be able to click the spot they visited on a map and enter bird sightings, and they will also be able to retrieve information from any area in our region about any species.

Our conservation campaigns grow as needed, according to the issues that arise and the energies of our volunteers. We recruit people to represent the interests of birds and their habitat needs on important task forces and projects. These include Lake Calumet, Midewin, Pratt's Wayne Woods/Fermilab, Bartel Grasslands, Paul Douglas Preserves, Glenview NAS Prairie, Grant Park, Montrose, Lincoln Park Bird Sanctuary, Burnham Harbor, McCormick Place, Chicago Park District landscaping guidelines, Lake Michigan recovery plan, and Mayor Daley's Wildlife committee. The last eight fall under the aegis of our Lake Front Bird Habitat Task Force, co-chaired by Chris Williamson, Leslie Borns, and Terry Schilling. Mayor Daley's interest in improving city bird habitat spawned many citizen participation efforts in which we have been able to participate. Our representatives provide quarterly updates on our campaigns, and secretary Lee Ramsey