

Bird Conservation Issues and Challenges

The old saying “birds of a feather flock together” was certainly true this year! More than 100 like-minded bird conservationists from across our great state flocked together for the 13th Annual Missouri Bird Conservation Initiative (MoBCI) Conference, held on August 21-22, 2015, at the Peachtree Catering & Banquet Center in Columbia, MO. These enthusiastic bird lovers traveled from all over to listen and learn about the variety of threats and challenges facing bird management in Missouri and elsewhere. This year’s Conference theme was aptly named “To Kill a Mockingbird,” and the program was packed with information and thought-provoking sessions geared at identifying solutions to some of the most serious threats facing our birds and their habitats.

MoBCI is a partnership of more than 72 organizations that “get excited about birds!” We are a diverse group of conservation-minded bird watchers, hunters, business owners, academicians, state and federal professionals, and citizens committed to working together to sustain healthy habitats for the benefit of resident and migrant birds in Missouri and for the enjoyment and economic benefit of Missouri citizens. Recognizing that much more can be accomplished if we jointly engage in what are truly common goals, we can promote an understanding of our respective individual and organizational interests in birds. So successful is this partnership that MoBCI received a national award, entitled “2008 Outstanding Contributions to Bird Conservation,” from the NABCI/Association of Joint Venture Management Boards. We are also truly proud of our MoBCI’s grant program, which began in 2004. With funds from the Missouri Department of Conservation, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service/Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, and the National Wild Turkey Federation, more than 103 projects have been completed by awarding more than \$1.5 million in grant funding. These funds were leveraged (i.e., matched) by more than \$3.3 million from partners, resulting in a total of \$4.8 million being put on-the-ground for bird habitats in Missouri.

MoBCI demonstrates how local/state level bird conservation partnerships can be effective and transform opportunities into on-the-ground accomplishments. A premier activity of MoBCI is our annual conferences. This year, Dr. Peter Raven, a world-renowned botanist, environmentalist and author set the pace for the conference participants through his keynote address. Dr. Raven is the George Engelmann Professor of Botany Emeritus at Washington University in St. Louis, and longtime Director (now Emeritus) of the Missouri Botanical Garden. Dr. Raven provided a worldwide perspective on conservation and the need for biodiversity in ecological systems, with many references and examples from Missouri. He explained that our glades, prairies, woodlands and forests (esp. pine forests) have been greatly diminished through past decades, we should be proud of what we have accomplished in Missouri in terms of natural community restoration. Dr. Raven was very witty and mesmerized the crowd, although you couldn’t help feeling disparity at times given the huge issues of the ecological effects of climate change, invasions from non-native species, and the seemingly unstoppable extinctions of species (esp. tropical rainforest spp.) at an alarming rate. As a glimmer of good news, Dr. Raven said that bird species are going extinct at only half the rate of other organisms (I guess that is good news?). The record-setting conference crowd gained new perspectives from Dr. Raven on the importance of diverse plant communities, the impacts of climate change, and how sustaining life, including birds, hinges on diversity. Among the things that we can do as a group for conservation, he said to continue

establishing parks and preserves, learn and train citizens to take action, and prepare guides and information. Dr. Raven encouraged each of us as individuals to be committed to conservation by promoting international understanding, to learn more about environmental facts, to teach others about our environment, and vote for leaders that promote conservation.

Several other fact-filled presentations during the one-day Conference were provided by John Schulz, National Coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy's non-lead campaign. He cited many of the findings in Technical Review 08-01, a publication by The Wildlife Society (June 2008), entitled "Sources and Implications of Lead Ammunition and Fishing Tackle on Natural Resources." John's passionate message centered on the serious problem of avian lead poisoning and how it is caught in a web of politics and fear. He said that building relationships is not enough, we just need to stand-up, admit that it is a problem, and do something about it.

For me, one of the most eye-opening revelations during the conference were how birds, and especially pollinators, are so severely impacted through the use of neonicotinoid pesticides. Introduced in the early 1990's under a common trade name Imidacloprid, it is currently the most widely used insecticide in the world. Highly soluble in water, it can be applied by soil injection, tree injection, application to the skin of the plant, broadcast foliar, ground application as a granular or liquid formulation, or as a pesticide-coated seed treatment and is widely used for pest control in agriculture. Recent research suggests that widespread agricultural use of Imidacloprid and other pesticides have contributed to as much as 3.5% annual declines in bird populations due to less availability of insect prey, both terrestrial and aquatic species of insects.

We were also honored to have Conservation Commissioner Dave Murphy on our program this year. Dave discussed "avian apathy," a syndrome common to the public where they are increasingly disconnected from an outdoor lifestyle and don't care about wild things and wild places. Citing a quote from Aldo Leopold, "there are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot," Dave encouraged us to personalize our message of conservation and seek out landowners and politicians face-to-face to let them know we care about conservation. Following this same message, Brandon Butler, Executive Director of the Conservation Federation of Missouri (CFM), explained how legislative changes can have immediate and long lasting impacts (good and bad) on how conservation happens. The Missouri Bird Conservation Initiative is an affiliate member of CFM and Brandon encouraged our members to participate in Conservation Day at the Capital and use that opportunity to deliver our message about the importance of bird conservation. He said, if you are interested in the serious issues facing conservation you should sign-up on CFM's Legislative Action Center, which makes it very easy to contact our representatives and ask for their support for conservation.

Ethan Duke and Dana Ripper, Missouri River Bird Observatory, provided an entertaining and informative luncheon presentation on their bird monitoring work, and their outreach and education efforts in Missouri. Following lunch, the group discussed the issues covered during the program presentations and a number of other important issues through an interactive, moderated session. There was never a dull moment during this session and our emotionally-charged audience discussed many innovative ways to address the threats and challenges facing birds. We all agreed that we need to embrace technology and develop ways to use it to advance bird conservation. Other goals we set included sharing more information with landowners and

reasons to value conservation of resources, working on communications to improve our messages, understanding more about the broad and complicated range of issues and challenges we face, and realize that we CAN make a difference as an individual and by continuing to work as a team, and by contributing funds and other resources to support our causes.

Ending the conference on a positive note, we were treated to a lively presentation about the real threats associated with wildlife diseases, presented by Kelly Straka, MDC Veterinarian. Kelly did a great job of not overwhelming the audience by this highly technical subject, she discussed many controversial subjects such as avian influenza in captive poultry and migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. After hearing that we all could be “fomites” (look it up), our attention turned to Norman Murray, MDC Species and Habitat Unit Chief, to discuss whether patch burn grazing is as simple and effective as it sounds. Norman did a great job of describing the ins and outs of a difficult subject which has been a focus of controversy for several years within the realm of prairie management. The take home message was that prairie managers strive for restoration and diversity of publically-owned, native prairie habitats, and not for the benefit of cattle production. Jody Eberly, USFS Fire Program Manager, lit a fire under the audience during her discussion of landscape scale burning in Missouri. Asking the question “is bigger really better?” she began with some history about the use of prescribed fire in the Missouri Ozarks (began in 1980s) and discussed the set of complex variables, ranging from biological to social to political, that must be addressed before ever striking a match.

MoBCI members realize that our respective organizational interests in birds are varied, but also that these diverse interests, if unified, represent a powerful force of action and voice on behalf of birds and their habitats. Perhaps most importantly, MoBCI has created a forum for diverse bird interests to know and better appreciate one another. This is certainly the case during our annual conferences, our collaboration strengthens our resolve to fight for the conservation of birds and other wildlife and their habitats in Missouri. MoBCI members create an atmosphere and attitude that so much more can be achieved for bird conservation when working as a team. In summary, our common message of the 2015 MoBCI Conference that can be adopted by everyone is enjoy the quality outdoors and nature we have in Missouri, take action to protect and conserve our outdoor heritage by challenging family and friends to join the fight, and especially let your legislative representatives know how important conservation is to you by contacting them. How sad it would be if we were never again to hear the song of the mockingbird!

Gene Gardner, Chair
Missouri Bird Conservation Initiative