

Celebrating and Appreciating ABA Members' Bird Conservation Initiatives

Conservation Milestones are published annually in *Birding* to recognize efforts toward building a better future for birds and for birders. If you have a conservation milestone to share, or know someone who deserves to be lauded for conservation and community activities, please contact Conservation Milestones Editor Raymond VanBuskirk (Raymond@BrantTours.com). We are especially enthusiastic about stories that include photos and contact information or other resources that inspire others to make their own contributions.

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BioBlitz: Bringing People Together on the Borderlands

On Mar. 2 and 3, 2019, nearly 200 people from both sides of the U. S.–Mexico border gathered to document the flora and fauna of the region as part of the second annual Border BioBlitz. Coordinated by Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers (N-Gen) in collaboration with many partners, the Border BioBlitz is a two-day community citizen-science effort to record as many species as possible along a one-kilometer band on both sides of the international border.

In 2019, independently organized teams of researchers and community members from four states in the U. S. and three states in Mexico visited 29 sites all along the border to document the stunning biological diversity of the borderlands. Participants used the eBird and iNaturalist smartphone apps to document their observations. They recorded nearly 1,100 species across all taxa, including 230 species of birds. These bird observations, in particular, highlight the character of the

borderlands as a place of overlap and coming together, a unique confluence of ecological communities and biomes. Some recorded species, such as the Green Jay, reach the northern limits of their ranges in the borderlands, while other species, such as the Mallard, approach the southern limits of their ranges in this area during the winter.

The ecosystems of the borderlands do not recognize international borders, and neither do the plants and animals that live there. The Border BioBlitz is an effort to collect meaningful data to fill gaps in our knowledge about the biodiversity of the region—biodiversity that currently faces many threats, from expansion of border security infrastructure, to land development, to climate change.

Bringing people together to enjoy and document nature—through phone apps, cameras, field journals, and our own eyes and hearts—builds and strengthens relationships

Tijuana Border BioBlitz team members try out the iNaturalist app at the Binational Friendship Garden along the border wall. Photo by © Michelle María Early Capistrán.





Regardless of the Milwaukee Bucks' stats and standings, this basketball team is a winner in our book. Pictured here is the Fiserv Forum, the Bucks' new bird-friendly arena. Photo by © Milwaukee Bucks—Kenny Yoo.

and cultural perceptions across geopolitical boundaries.

For more about the Border BioBlitz and N-Gen go online at: tinyurl.com/border-bb-2019.

Bucks Basketball: It's a Slam Dunk for the Birds

You're already a huge fan of birds, and, by the time you finish this article, you're sure to be a fan of the Milwaukee Bucks basketball team, too.

In a worldwide first, the team's new 17,500-seat sports and entertainment arena, the Fiserv Forum, has been approved for the U. S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program's Bird Collision Deterrence credit, which was created in partnership with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). The arena will receive the LEED Silver® certification, a globally recognized symbol of sustainability achievement and the most widely used green building rating system in the world.

"The Bucks stepped up for birds in a way that no sports franchise ever has," says Bryan Lenz, current Collision Campaign Manager for ABC and former director of Bird City

Wisconsin. "When Bird City Wisconsin approached the team about designing [the arena] with birds in mind, the proposal was greeted with open arms, which speaks volumes about the character of the Milwaukee Bucks organization."

Up to one billion birds die annually after colliding with glass in the U. S., a number that contributes to ongoing declines in bird populations. To address this threat, the new arena features several bird-saving measures, including glass that is visible to birds and programmed lighting that turns off overnight during migration periods. Ongoing efforts, in partnership with the Wisconsin Humane Society, include a plan to monitor the arena for any signs of window collisions.

Bucks' ownership took other steps to reduce the arena's environmental footprint, including landscaping with native plants, implementing a composting program, and banning the distribution of plastic straws and other petroleum products. A number of organizations played critical roles in the process, including Bucks' leadership; architectural, construction, and consulting firms; Bird City Wisconsin; and ABC.

"The Milwaukee Bucks have demonstrated outstanding conservation leadership and shown that it is possible to build a world-class

facility with birds in mind," Lenz says. "We hope that their example will inspire others to take action."

Large buildings such as Fiserv Forum are important, yet homes and low-rise buildings cause most bird collisions. To learn how to make your windows safer for birds with little expense and effort, visit birdsmartglass.org.

ABC is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization whose mission is to conserve native birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. Learn more about its Collisions Campaign online at tinyurl.com/ABA-glass-birds.

Bird Conservation Fund: Crowdfunding for Conservation

The Bird Conservation Fund (BCF) was launched in late 2016 as a volunteer-run organization dedicated to raising small donations to fund tangible, on-the-ground bird conservation projects. The focus is on awarding small grants to conservation groups that can promote BCF's mission to conserve endangered or vulnerable bird species around the world.

"BCF came out of an idea that I had about the potential power of applying crowdfunding to raising 'new' money to support bird conservation," says Graham Chisholm, one of the fund's originators. "Our aim has been to motivate gifts from birders and others who want to see their donation make a difference for birds by using a zero overhead model and getting the small grants into the hands of biologists and conservationists working close to the ground."

It was relatively easy to get the fund off the ground, as those involved had extensive expe-

rience in the nonprofit world as well as conservation. Chisholm and his team of volunteers had worked with the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force in the past, so they decided to test their approach by crowdfunding for a two-year grant to support a young biologist in Bangladesh working on this critically endangered—and undeniably charismatic—species.

After the initial enthusiasm for working with Spoon-billed Sandpipers, the reality of doing on-the-ground conservation began to sink in for the task force. It was important not to overextend volunteers, to be realistic about time commitments, and to set efficient and accomplishable goals.

Birders seem to have an insatiable desire to do good, especially as it relates to bird conservation, but they don't always have an outlet for their desires. BCF showcases what we can accomplish when everyone gives just a little. The organization encourages birders and wildlife

lovers to make donations in the \$10–50 range. Some donors have gone above and beyond, having donated \$1,000 or more. The group is happy to partner with large conservation organizations, but desires that funds raised support the work of biologists and conservationists on the ground with no overhead taken by BCF or other organizations.

Since it began, BCF has awarded six grants, totaling \$42,019. These grants have supported projects in Bangladesh, Madagascar, Myanmar, and Russia. Next up: funding bird research in the Western Hemisphere. Examples of past grants are Spoon-billed Sandpiper surveys in Bangladesh (\$15,934), wintering Spoon-billed Sandpiper surveys in Myanmar (\$4,050), support for establishing a nature park in the Russian Far East (\$15,000), and support for surveys and conservation planning in northeastern Madagascar (\$5,035).

BCF is currently raising money for a project to protect Brazilian Mergansers, and fundraising will soon get under way for a project protecting Juan Fernandez and Stejneger's petrels on the Juan Fernández Islands off the coast of Chile. By conserving these species, the planned projects will safeguard important habitat used by migratory birds that spend at least some part of their year in the U. S.

BCF has focused on being a digital organization via its website and Facebook platforms. In doing so, the organization has managed to maintain a “no-overhead” model of project funding, and any general operating costs have been covered by board members or donors committed to helping these causes.

The BCF online network continues to grow, and has become an effective way to showcase the power of small grants (\$2,500–20,000) to advance the conservation of endangered and vulnerable species. Learn more online at birdfund.org.

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory: Ensuring a Future for American Oystercatchers in Texas

For eight years running, Susan Heath has cut through the coastal waters of the Upper Texas Coast in a quest to better understand the lives of the American Oystercatchers in this area. Before her work began, little

Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project grantees gear up to track one of the world's rarest birds. The people pictured here used to hunt shorebirds in this area, but now earn income by protecting them. Photo courtesy of Bangladesh Spoon-billed Sandpiper Conservation Project.



“Hey, Mom—Can they see me?” Young oystercatchers rely on cryptic coloration to protect them from land and aerial predators. Photo by © Susan Heath.

was known about the general life history or particular breeding success of American Oystercatchers in the western Gulf of Mexico. Are they migratory or do they defend their territories year-round? With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Heath, Director of Conservation for the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO), spearheads a project to find the answers to this and other questions. She and her colleagues are filling in knowledge gaps about oystercatcher biology and providing valuable insight that will aid conservation organizations charged with protecting the species.

Heath has gathered so much information on these birds over the past eight field seasons that she could practically pass as an oystercatcher. Don't laugh—Many of her study subjects now seem to recognize her by sight. We now know that oystercatchers along this section of the Texas coast do not migrate and that many remain territorial year-round. Young birds not old enough to breed roam the coastline in search of food resources, but rarely stray far from home. Unlike the oystercatchers found along the Atlantic Coast, the Texas birds nest almost exclusively on small bay islands and man-made spoil islands. These spoil islands were created from dredge material accreted as the Intracoastal Waterway was built and then re-dredged, but with current regulations the materials needed to form these islands are not being replenished. Alarming data show that most of the oystercatcher nesting habitat is rapidly becoming unsuitable as the bay islands erode in the constant wind-driven tides. Sea-level rise and the growing frequency and tenacity of storms are magnifying this issue.

The few tall islands that still exist are overcrowded, as they are also home to thousands of terns, herons, egrets, and gulls. Given the territoriality of oystercatchers, there is only



Susan Heath is about to release three juvenile American Oystercatchers recently equipped with leg tags to identify the birds from a distance. Photo by © Martin Hagne.

space enough for small numbers of these striking birds. The oystercatchers of the Texas coast appear to do best when there are many small bay islands for nesting surrounded by intertidal reefs that provide food resources.

What's next?

Because the GCBO does not have experience with implementing large-scale habitat restoration projects, the organization has reached out to like-minded conservation organizations and is partnering with several of them on restoration efforts. As a result of the data collected by GCBO, there is more interest

than ever in the oystercatchers' plight. Well-supported groups, like Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Galveston Bay Foundation, and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are working right now to create suitable island nesting habitat.

To learn more about GCBO and to help them conserve Gulf Coast birds and their habitats, check out the GCBO website at gcho.org.