Onward

A Note from David Yarnold

There’s no question that 2020 has been full of immense challenges. But Audubon has a long history of overcoming any obstacles and seizing every opportunity to protect birds, no matter how difficult the circumstances. In fact, one of our first major successes was helping to pass the Migratory Bird Treaty Act — in the midst of World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic.

And today, thanks to your compassion and support, we are already evolving and learning how to be more effective, inclusive advocates to protect birds now and well into the future. I can’t thank you enough for making this vital work possible.

Audubon Scores Major Win for Migratory Birds

For 100 years, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act has required companies to take common-sense steps to protect birds — actions including covering oil waste pits and implementing best practices for power lines to reduce bird electrocutions and collisions.

But the Trump administration has slashed protections to this critical law, letting businesses off the hook for unintentional, but preventable, bird deaths. In fact, the devastating 2010 BP oil spill, which killed an estimated 1 million birds and resulted in a $100 million fine, would no longer be punishable under the new interpretation of the law.

Fortunately, thanks to the extraordinary support of Great Egret Society members like you, Audubon was able to fight back. We joined five other environmental groups and eight states in suing the administration to uphold this critical law. And in early August, a federal judge ruled in our favor, confirming the MBTA’s unambiguous prohibition on killing protected birds.

While this latest decision is a significant blow to the Trump administration’s effort to enshrine its legal opinion in a formal rule, we fully expect an appeal fighting the court’s ruling. So we absolutely can’t let up now.

That’s why Audubon is fully supporting the Migratory Bird Protection Act, which would affirm the prohibition of unintentional bird deaths under the law and establish a permitting program to protect companies that adopt best practices to safeguard birds.

And with your continued commitment, we will do whatever it takes to defend the MBTA and the environmental protections our birds depend on to thrive.
Defending Vital Bird Habitat

Audubon Files Suit to Protect Coasts from Sand Mining

Despite an Atlantic hurricane season forecast to be above normal, with several named and major storms, the Trump administration is overturning long-standing safeguards for pristine coastal communities.

Greenlighting the use of taxpayer dollars to remove sand from protected coastal areas, the Trump administration is eroding natural buffers that act as the first line of defense against storm surge, wind, and flooding — and serve as critical habitat for birds.

At a time when climate change, coastal development, overfishing, and pollution have caused shorebird populations to plummet by 70 percent, the administration’s ‘Excavation Rule’ puts these vulnerable birds, including terns and plovers, at even greater risk.

Making matters worse, this unlawful rule was issued without an opportunity for public comment or an environmental assessment to analyze the destructive effects of sand mining on mainland coastal communities or the birds that rely on undisturbed coastal areas to feed, nest, and spawn.

But thanks to passionate Great Egret Society members like you, we have filed suit to protect the vulnerable storm-prone coastal areas along the Atlantic Coast, Gulf of Mexico, Great Lakes, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands — and to defend the at-risk coastal birds that depend on them.

Fighting to Defend Bristol Bay

Audubon is also working relentlessly to stop the proposed Pebble Mine along southwest Alaska’s Bristol Bay. Despite the sensitive region being home to more than 190 bird species, 27 globally significant Important Bird Areas, and one of the world’s largest concentrations of seabird colonies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approved the mine in late July.

If completed, this dangerous project would be one of the largest open-pit gold mines in the world, in an area already vulnerable to climate change, with drought, winter warming, and seasonal flooding all projected to alter the region.

But with your help, Audubon has worked to help protect the rich resources of Bristol Bay for more than a decade. And together, we can keep fighting to ensure Alaska’s resources are directed away from short-sighted projects like Pebble Mine and toward long-term investments that will ensure a more resilient future for Alaska’s birds.
Audubon and a broad coalition of environmental and justice groups are going to court to fight changes that would gut 50 years of environmental protection under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The administration’s new rules would eliminate environmental reviews for many projects, limit the harmful impacts that are considered when reviews do take place, and hinder public participation — allowing federal agencies to willfully ignore the serious environmental and health impacts of their decisions and undermine the core protections of this bedrock law.

At a time when climate change already threatens two-thirds of birds with extinction, it must be accounted for in decision making. And we must do everything we can to mitigate, not accelerate, its effects.

The administration’s rollbacks of this vital law are both dangerous and illegal. But with the strong support of donors like you, we can continue working to safeguard the air, water, and environment that birds and people depend on.
Audubon’s Inaugural Seabird Action Fly-in

In late July, Audubon staff, members, students, and volunteers from across the country tuned in to Audubon’s first virtual Seabird Action Fly-in to tell members of Congress about the threats facing seabirds, the importance of healthy fisheries, and the need for sound policy.

The five-day event immersed participants from 10 states and all four flyways in advocacy trainings, forage fish webinars, social media activities, virtual seabird watching, and legislative appointments.

During a series of 18 virtual meetings with key members of Congress and their staff, participants asked lawmakers to advance policies that support seabirds, maintain robust protections for fisheries, include climate impacts in fisheries management, increase protections for marine birds that are caught unintentionally, enhance essential fish habitat protections, and fully fund National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration programs that protect fish and coastal habitats.

And our hard work is paying off! In August, we won a major victory for Atlantic seabirds when a small forage fish called Atlantic menhaden — a major food source for many seabirds on the East Coast — was properly recognized as the foundation of the ocean ecosystem.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission voted unanimously to adopt a new approach, known as ecological reference points, to ensure the menhaden population never drops below levels that would put birds and other wildlife at risk. Managing fish this way will mean more menhaden and healthier marine life from Maine to Florida.

“ There comes a point where you need to take action to protect the things you care about — and for me that is birds.”

—Sree Kandhadai, student advocate and fly-in participant
Native Plants Help Restore the Colorado River

In the arid Southwest, ensuring sufficient water and habitat for people and birds requires careful planning. And one major component of water planning involves restoring habitat in riverside corridors — removing invasive plants and replacing them with native vegetation.

That’s why when Audubon testified in support of a bill that would fund invasive plant removal during Arizona’s 2019 legislative session, we also stressed that planting drought-tolerant native plants is just as important as removing invasive ones.

And lawmakers heard our message loud and clear, improving the bill’s language to include native plant restoration projects along Arizona waterways, thanks to Audubon’s input.

One of those projects is in the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, which encompasses more than 4,000 acres along the Lower Colorado River in Yuma, Arizona — and serves as vital habitat for federally threatened and endangered birds, including the Yuma Ridgway’s Rail and Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Today, efforts along the Yuma riverfront are making the area an even more important refuge for birds, providing new marsh and backwaters and thousands of native trees, all creating habitat for more than 300 species of wildlife.

Thanks to the support of thoughtful Great Egret Society members like you, there is renewed hope for birds that rely on this vital habitat.

Audubon Releases Water to Sustain the Rio Grande

Despite expectations for an “average” water supply this summer, the Rio Grande instead faced crippling drought and one of the driest water supplies in more than 50 years.

And while the Rio Grande’s unpredictable water supply cycle is nothing new, as our climate continues to change, wetter seasons become far less frequent — and the dry periods are that much harder. Our inability to anticipate these cycles makes water management more difficult, especially for birds like the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

But with support from Great Egret Society donors like you, we are creating solutions that work for people and the birds that rely on a healthy flowing river. Audubon has helped to secure 250 acre-feet of water per year for the next eight years, water that can be stored during wetter years — such as 2019 — and saved for dry times like this one.

In 2020, we are releasing 530 acre-feet of this water into the Rio Grande near Los Lunas, New Mexico, in an effort tightly coordinated with water managers and biologists to ensure effective and efficient use.

By building partnerships with water managers, cities, and farmers in central New Mexico, Audubon is working to create essential, lasting solutions to provide water for key sections of the Rio Grande.

As we work to minimize the effects of climate change, this year allows another chance to practice, prepare, and ensure an even more resilient future.
Renewed Hope in the Gulf Coast

High-diving Brown Pelicans are known for their ability to survive steep drops before plunging into the water to catch fish. Boasting 6- to 8-foot wingspans, the powerful fliers are regularly seen soaring along the Gulf.

And historic Queen Bess Island in Louisiana — home to one of the newest projects to restore bird nesting habitat on the Gulf Coast since the BP Deepwater Horizon oil disaster — has witnessed the dramatic setbacks Brown Pelicans have faced. And their inspiring recovery.

The iconic coastal bird’s decline began as a combined result of plume hunting, starvation due to overfishing, and the pesticide DDT, which hindered their ability to breed. By the time Louisiana officially made the Brown Pelican its state bird in 1966, there were no breeding pelicans in the state.

After intense recovery efforts starting in 1968, in addition to federal regulations banning DDT, Brown Pelicans’ nesting seasons became more successful, leading to the resurgence of the species. By 2009, the Brown Pelican was completely removed from the endangered species list, and Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count confirmed the species was steadily rising in Louisiana.

But only one year later, the BP oil disaster devastated the Gulf Coast. Brown Pelicans quickly became the face of the disaster, as the country lost 10 percent of the species’ population. The oil also damaged vegetation that holds Louisiana’s barrier islands together, accelerating the land loss the state was already suffering.

But thanks to the work of tireless conservationists, Brown Pelicans have beaten the odds. Today, Queen Bess Island is a state wildlife refuge — and the first project in Audubon’s Gulf Plan to be fully implemented. The critical area is now home to hundreds of Brown Pelicans, and Louisiana recently enlarged the island’s footprint, providing even more habitat that will help the species, and others, to recover and thrive.

One of Audubon’s targeted priority birds, the Brown Pelican has seen its population increase by well over 1,000 percent in the last 50 years, proof of all we can accomplish when we come together and take action to protect our birds.
As a Great Egret Society member, your gifts fund Audubon’s well-integrated program of science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Your leadership-level support allows Audubon to advance conservation solutions to ensure the birds that bring us so much joy each day can survive for generations to come.

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