

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

A Guide to Managing and Protecting Your Land
for Neotropical Migratory Birds
in the Upper Mississippi River Blufflands



BY MARLENE EHRESMAN

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

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This booklet was produced and distributed



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Color photo section (center of booklet)

Includes summary of main text and color photos of common neotropical migrant species, threatened and endangered species, and species grouped by upland or floodplain communities.



INTRODUCTION

Why Neotropical migrants?

Avian (bird) communities are pieces of the biodiversity puzzle and vital components of the *ecosystems** of which we are all a part.

Some birds are permanent residents, some migrate short distances, and some migrate thousands of miles. Some nest in cavities of trees, some on the ground. Some eat insects, some seeds, some other animals. Some prefer to nest in the interior of a large *forest*, some in a ditch between a road and a crop field.

Whatever their *niche*, or role, in an ecosystem, birds—in all their wondrous forms—benefit us in many ways. When birds and all of the other native *species*

are present in the right *habitat* and in appropriate numbers, they help keep our biological systems healthy. Birds help control insects and rodents, disperse seeds, eat carrion, and become food for others. They are often sensitive *indicators* of Earth's condition, and—more specifically—we can often gauge the condition of certain habitats or ecosystems by the presence or absence of birds.

However, one group of birds, the *Neotropical migrants* (North-to-South American migrators), are suffering tremendous onslaughts here in their breeding areas as well as on their wintering grounds south of the United States' border. Because these birds affect and are affected by the

Some names are well-known, like Bobolink and Baltimore Oriole. Some are less known, like Cerulean Warbler. Each depends on the Mississippi River

natural balance on two continents, protecting them is especially important.

Why the Upper Mississippi River blufflands?

Various Neotropical migrant species use different Midwest habitats for nesting, resting and refueling during migration. However, as one of the nation's major migratory flyways, the Upper Mississippi River is especially important.

Meanwhile, because many of the Neotropical migrant species with declining populations are savanna- and forest-dwelling birds, people are increasingly interested in studying these natural habitats that birds require for survival. And because the Upper Mississippi River bluffland region of Iowa contains much of our state's remaining forests, oak *woodlands*, *savannas* and unique hilltop prairies, an increasing number of Iowans are seeking ways to improve and protect this area of the state for the benefit of all of us.

Iowa is not alone in this search. Private citizens, public agencies, businesses and environmental organizations in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois are also working

THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER BLUFFLANDS REGION



In the upper Mississippi River valley, the hilly regions adjoining the rivers and their tributaries are known as “bluffs.” These bluffs define the beautiful and valuable river valleys that link Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois.

The Blufflands Alliance is a private and public partnership of organizations, individuals and landowners working to inspire a common vision for this blufflands



***Words in italics are explained further in the glossary on page**

together to protect the natural resources of the Upper Mississippi River bluffs. Since 1995, member organizations of the Blufflands Alliance have helped landowners protect more than 10,000 acres in the bluffs region of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin through conservation easements, acquisitions or other land protection methods.

Why now?

Data from numerous studies indicate that a growing number of species, such as the forest-dwelling Veery and Wood Thrush, are in trouble (DeGraaf and Rappole 1995), and some may be in **big** trouble with reports of an estimated 75% decline in *population* over the last 25 years.

The last decade of research has begun to sort out the complicated natural histories of these, some of our most threatened, bird species. No one knows exactly how to reverse the declines, nor is there time to wait for all the answers.

In the meantime, this publication contains some suggestions to help landowners and land managers take positive action today.

Why you?

The current conservation strategy is to identify, maintain and restore large tracts of habitat most likely to benefit avian populations. This does not mean, however, that vast acres of land need to be held in public ownership. Private landowners can and do play crucial roles in the decline, and recovery, of migratory birds and wildlife in general.

For example, 92% of Iowa's forests are privately owned (IDNR 2001). Inherent in what it means to own property is to have "control" over what you do with it. But what one does with it is always subject to zoning regulations, statutes and just plain regard for one's neighbors. Landowners own not just a piece of property, but also

Bruce Ehresman



Neotropical migrant birds winter south of the U.S./ Mexican border, then migrate into the United States and north to nest. The Common Yellowthroat is one of the Neotropical migrant species that nests in the Upper Mississippi River bluffs, a critical area for this and other groups of birds.

a piece of the neighborhood.

If we think of the land, and all its components, as a neighborhood—a community—we can see that humans are part of that community. By logical extension, there are not only practical, but also moral and ethical obligations to include good land use in the way we treat the communities of which we are a part. Protecting the land means protecting the community, and protecting the community protects our own interests.

Why this book?

People appreciate the value of natural resources but often lack enough information to truly understand the connections between themselves and the environment or between healthy natural resources and a flourishing economy.

While no single publication can cover every situation for every species and landowner, we hope this booklet provides you, Iowa's landowners and managers, with a basic understanding of needs and solutions, plus a little more.

Through this publication, we hope that you come to understand:

- why birds in general, and Neotropical migratory landbirds specifically, are important to humans,
- how they can positively affect your

bottom line and the state's economy,

- what problems the birds are facing,
- what we all can do to turn the situation around,
- how you can protect those natural areas that serve you and the birds so well and
- where to find the resources needed to accomplish your goals and practice good land management.

As you read these pages, ask yourself, "What do I want my land to look like, to **be**, in 10 years? 25 years? Seven generations from now?"

And while you are walking your property some day, ask yourself, "How rich is my land?" It's more than the number of hay bales or bushels of corn produced; a truly rich land sustains humans and birds, wildlife and fish.

We are not suggesting that all of Iowa's landscape return to pre-settlement conditions, but we are definitely suggesting that we need to do a better job of protecting and improving our biodiversity. Doing so will take local and regional action on many fronts by many hands: land protection, environmental education, landscape management, habitat restoration and better land use policies and decisions.