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NEOTROPICAL MIGRATORY BIRD CONSERVATION ACT

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Mr. CHAFEE, from the Committee on Environment and Public
Works, submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany S. 1970]

The Committee on Environment and Public Works, to which was referred the bill (S. 1970) to require the Secretary of the Interior to establish a program to provide assistance in the conservation of neotropical migratory birds, having considered the same, reports favorably thereon with an amendment, and recommends that the bill, as amended, do pass.

GENERAL STATEMENT AND BACKGROUND

Each autumn, some 5 billion birds from 500 species migrate between their breeding grounds in North America and tropical habitats in the Caribbean, Central and South America. These neotropical migrants—or New World tropical migrants—are birds that migrate between the biogeographic region stretching across Mexico, Central America, much of the Caribbean, and the northern part of South America. They comprise a vast array of birds well known to many in the Americas: ducks and other waterfowl; raptors; shorebirds such as sandpipers and plovers; terns and gulls; nightjars; swifts; martins; hummingbirds; woodpeckers; flycatchers; thrushes; vireos; tanagers; warblers; buntings; orioles; blackbirds; and dozens of other species. In some parts of the United States and Canada, almost all of the birds migrate to the tropics for the winter. Of those that breed in the northern coniferous forests, for example, 80 percent of the species and 94 percent of the individuals migrate to the tropics. About 62 percent of the species and 75 percent of the individuals that breed in the eastern deciduous forests

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migrate. Migrants breeding in the central grasslands comprise 76 percent of the species and 73 percent of the individuals.

The aggregate figures tell only part of the story, however. A fuller appreciation of the nature of migratory birds can be acquired by considering the individual odysseys of some of these species. Turkey vultures, with a wingspan of greater than 5 ° feet, migrate from their winter home in the southern United States, Mexico or Central America so punctually each spring that in Hinckley, Ohio, a festival celebrates their return each March 15th. Although Sandhill cranes breed in relatively small and scattered populations across the northern United States, Canada and Alaska, during their northward migrations from Mexico and Central America, upward of half a million birds may be found at staging areas such as along the Platte River in Nebraska. Killdeer living in the northern United States migrate up to 6,000 miles, often straying far from their normal routes, observed in Europe, Greenland, and Hawaii. The Ruby-throated hummingbird, with a four-inch wing span, will travel up to 3,500 miles, making the 500 mile crossing of the Caribbean without stopping. The Blackpoll warbler, after migrating from Alaska to Nova Scotia, will first begin a southern journey over the Atlantic to Venezuela, with a staging area in Bermuda.

The natural challenges facing these migratory birds are profound. Many migratory birds experience a relatively low survival rate, due to nest predation and brood parasitism, as well as natural competition among species, predation and general hazards along their migratory routes. Human induced threats have exacerbated these challenges. The greatest human induced threat is the continuing loss of habitat in the Caribbean and Latin America, both in staging areas and wintering areas of these species. Pollution, including widespread use of pesticides, and overharvesting have also taking their toll on migratory bird populations in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Some of these impacts are magnified because the birds assemble in relatively small patches of habitat during their migrations, so that adverse impacts to those areas can have exaggerated impacts on the species. Such is the case with the dickcissel, which breeds across much of the eastern United States, but winters in only a narrow stretch of Venezuelan grasslands. The species is threatened by continuing use of pesticides, and trapping, in these grasslands.

As a result of these impacts, populations of migratory birds have declined generally in recent years. Approximately 210 species of migratory birds in the United States are in serious decline, with 90 species either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The Mexican government has identified approximately 390 species of birds as being endangered, threatened, vulnerable or rare. Many of these are neotropical migratory birds.

While there are numerous efforts underway to protect these species and their habitat, they generally focus on specific categories of migratory birds or specific regions in the Americas. For example, in 1986, Canada and the United States entered into the North American Waterfowl Conservation Plan, joined by Mexico in 1994. This plan emphasizes waterfowl and wetlands conservation, although efforts are now being made to include other species sharing wetlands habitat. In 1991, the National Fish and Wildlife Founda-

tion began the neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation program, commonly known as Partners in Flight. This program provides funding, in cooperation with the U.S. Agency for International Development, for conservation projects in the Caribbean and Latin America, but not the United States. The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, a monitoring program that extends across the Americas, focuses on only shorebirds. Other monitoring plans and action plans exist for specific types of migratory birds and specific regions.

These programs have improved protections for some species of birds. For example, a joint project among the U.S. Departments of the Interior, Defense, and Agriculture, the Canadian and Argentinian Governments, the Boise State University's Raptor Research Center, and the Fish and Wildlife Foundation discovered the cause of sharp declines in certain populations of the Swainson's hawk, and took actions to redress these declines. The Swainson's hawk is a neotropical migrant that breeds in grassland, shrubsteppe, and agricultural habitats in North America, and winters in Argentina. Certain populations that bred in the western United States and Canada were exposed to pesticides on their wintering grounds in the La Pampa province of Argentina. Under the program, the Ciba-Geigy Company voluntarily imposed a ban on the sale of certain agrochemical compounds in the areas where the high mortality was occurring, and the decline in these populations of Swainson's hawks seems to have halted.

While this example illustrates progress in protecting migratory birds, it also underscores the need for additional projects. More importantly, as noted by the witnesses at the hearing before the committee on July 7, there is a need for a more comprehensive program to address the varied and significant threats facing the numerous species of migratory birds across their range. Frequently there is little, if any, coordination among the existing programs, nor is there any one program that serves as a link among them. A broader, more holistic approach would bolster existing conservation efforts and programs, fill the gaps between these programs, and promote new initiatives.

Migratory birds, apart from their intrinsic value, contribute to our aesthetic, environmental, and economic well-being. Many of these species protect crops and forests by feeding on insect pests. The ability of birds to control pest insects in both croplands and forests is well established, both by recent scientific studies, such as a U.S. Department of Agriculture estimate that a population of 3,000 Swainson's hawks in the western United States eat more than one million rodents each summer, and by rich anecdotal evidence, such as the rescue of the Mormon pioneers from an outbreak of grasshoppers, a flock of gulls. Many migratory birds feed on nuisance and health pests, such as flies and mosquitoes, and further help maintain healthy ecosystems by dispersing seeds and pollinating plants.

In addition to these environmental benefits, birds support a significant component of the economy. According to one study by the University of Georgia, bird watching is the fastest growing recreational activity in the country. Nearly 70 million Americans spend more than \$20 billion each year participating in bird-related

