

# Birds and Tanks

## Military bases protect habitat and species around the country.

BY PETER STANGEL, PH.D

**S**treaming through the green needles of the longleaf pines, the late-afternoon sun lit the grasses and ferns of the forest floor with a golden glow. In just a minute or two, the light would line up perfectly to illuminate the Red-cockaded Woodpecker's cavity. If all went as planned, an adult bird — its beak brimming with insects — would arrive at the nest and pause before feeding the nestlings chirping hungrily from the interior. Then I'd have the shot of a lifetime.

Only 30 feet from the cavity, I had been planning this photo for days. The tripod was secure, the telephoto lens was focused, and the elusive, endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker was about to be mine. Then the ground started to shake.

Earthquake? In North Carolina? I heard the rumble of the big diesel engines, and coming down the road were three of the biggest tanks I'd ever seen. These weren't

like the little Ford Explorer-sized tanks that sit in the front yards of the Veterans of Foreign Wars buildings. These were big, hulking, ship-sized behemoths — and they came past surprisingly fast. Perched in the top of each was a G.I., each of whom waved to me. All in all, it wasn't a surprising event — if you are doing bird studies on the U.S. Army's Fort Bragg outside of Fayetteville.

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As a guest on the army base, I was collecting feather samples from Red-cockaded for genetic analysis as part of my graduate work. The endangered woodpeckers flourish on Fort Bragg, as they do on many other Department of Defense bases. The passing

tanks became just one of several unique experiences that week, working in close proximity to our military.

The Department of Defense manages nearly 30 million acres of land spread across hundreds of installations. That's almost one-third the land protected as



Prothonotary Warblers are cavity nesters and eat insects and some seeds in wooded swamps.

national parks, one-fifth the land conserved as national wildlife refuges and an area about the size of Pennsylvania. The vast majority of this land is understandably restricted for military training and other uses. Although these bases might be out of sight for birders, they shouldn't be out of mind for their conservation value.

Despite a long legacy of natural resource conservation, the department's bird conservation efforts really took wing in 1991 when the agency joined the Partners in Flight program, an international effort focused on conserving migratory birds in the Western Hemisphere. The Navy was the first to sign, followed shortly by the Air Force and the Army.

The Navy's liaison and the military's first national representative to Partners in Flight, Joe Hautzenroder did yeoman's work to integrate the military into the bird conservation network. He organized workshops for DoD biologists to learn more about the

management needs of migratory birds and launched the first strategic plan for the network of military lands. Six years later, Chris Eberly became the full-time bird coordinator, providing the 25 natural resource biologists who comprise department's Partners in Flight network with the latest information about how to conserve birds.

The department's Partners in Flight program "supports and enhances the military mission by providing a focused and coordinated approach for the conservation of migratory and resident birds and their habitats on Defense lands," according to the website. Not surprisingly, Job No. 1 is to ensure the continued use of these lands for the military's training requirements. In day-to-day practice, this means surveying bases to find out which species are present, in what numbers and at what time of the year; understanding the habitat needs of these species; and monitoring populations to

detect upward or downward trends.

The military's natural resource managers work to ensure that species under their stewardship do not become legally threatened or endangered. This is important for the long-term survival of these species, and it guarantees that military training activities are not affected by the legal requirements associated with a species' endangered status. A strategic plan guides the military's bird conservation activities, and it addresses all areas of concern for birds, from habitat conservation to avoiding bird strikes by aircraft.

A quick review of some of the military's bird conservation priorities is enough to make birders start polishing the lenses on their binoculars. In Kansas, the Army's Fort Riley includes tens of thousands of acres of native tallgrass prairie, providing habitat for one of the largest known populations of Henslow's Sparrows. Moving southeast and into the Atlantic Ocean, the Navy bases on Puerto Rico and Cuba harbor mangroves — vital habitat for warblers such as Northern Waterthrush during the nonbreeding season.

Some of the best — and last remaining — streamside vegetation in California occurs at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton near San Diego as well as Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Barbara. The forests that hug Santa Margarita River, which runs through Camp Pendleton, shelter close to 50 percent of the entire breeding population of Least Bell's Vireo, an endangered subspecies (*Vireo bellii pusillus*).

Bay-breasted Warblers breed in coniferous forests mainly in Canada and northeastern states.



**BIRDWATCH:**  
**30 million**  
Acres of land managed by the U.S. Department of Defense

## CONSERVATION CORNER



Endangered in California, Least Bell's Vireos are at risk from brood parasitism, where cowbirds lay eggs in vireos' nests.

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Farther south, the Panama Canal Zone, originally under the control of the U.S. Department of Defense, was turned over to Panama in 1999. Through the efforts of Partners in Flight and other conservation groups, much of this area's vast tropical forest was protected or added to Parque Nacional Soberania. This is good news for the millions of migratory songbirds such as Prothonotary and Bay-breasted Warblers that migrate through this geographic funnel each spring and fall. The Upper Panama Bay also serves as a critical site for migratory shorebirds.

Back in the southeastern United States, where I was trying to get my award-winning photo of a Red-cockaded Woodpecker, extensive pine ecosystems provide essential habitat for Bachman's Sparrows, Brown-headed Nuthatches and Swainson's Warblers. Protecting and managing the habitats to benefit birds, however, remains just one role for the military.

The strategic plan includes using radar to track bird movements. This technology has benefitted conservation by identifying migration routes and stop-over sites. It also



Henslow's Sparrows have been attributed with singing a very unimpressive song: "Tsilisk."

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### For More Information...

Department of Defense

Partners in Flight: [www.dodpif.org](http://www.dodpif.org).

Partners in Flight: [www.partnersinflight.org](http://www.partnersinflight.org)

helps aircraft pilots avoid flocks during take-offs and landings, when most bird strikes occur. The military's Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard prevention program works continuously to improve flight safety.

The department also invests in long-term bird monitoring studies called MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship). It tracks population trends and pinpoint causes for increases or declines.

Military satellites have tracked birds outfitted with transmitters, revealing important information about migration routes and wintering sites. This technology, for example, was used to help identify where in South America Swainson's Hawks were being poisoned by pesticides.

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Aside from contributing technology, the military allows limited access on some bases to birders. The department's Partners in Flight website provides information within the Installations menu. Most Partners in Flight meetings are open to the public, and the hosts welcome input from local birders. Birders can join a listserve for the latest information on what the military is doing to help conserve birds. Check the website's Become Involved menu for details.

I never did get my award-winning photo of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, but I did get closer to a big tank that I ever thought possible. Did I mention the attack helicopters that swooped low over the trees while I was 40 feet up a ladder, trying to extract nestlings from a cavity so that I could take feather samples? It's all part of a day's work during bird conservation on a military base. 

WildBird Advisory Board member Peter Stangel, Ph.D., works as senior vice president for U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities.



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