



# Tribute to Donal C. O'Brien, a conservationist for the ages

## Title

Few leaders in the history of the conservation movement have been as passionate about birds as Donal C. O'Brien Jr., who passed away at his home in New Canaan, Connecticut, on September 8 at the age of 78 from pneumonia. Donal served 25 years on the National Audubon Society's Board of Directors, including 15 years as its chairman. During his board tenure, Donal co-chaired the Society's monumental strategic planning process to "connect people with nature." The plan led to the establishment of Audubon's network of state offices across the country. These offices, in turn, launched the Important Bird Areas program—there are now nearly 2,700 IBAs nationwide—and helped open 43 new Audubon centers. (One of these, the Audubon sanctuary and center at Pine Island, on North Carolina's Outer Banks, was named in his honor.) These centers reach a diverse array of new and younger audiences and inspire future conservation leaders. Donal also embraced Audubon's grassroots network of 465 community-based chapters. Donal O'Brien was the Honorary President of ICBP and BirdLife International – its highest honorary representative – from 1991 to 1994, when the organisation moved towards the establishment of the BirdLife International Partnership, marking a new revolutionary approach to international conservation through local empowerment. "Donal guided Birdlife International as our Honorary President, and he was instrumental in Audubon becoming the US BirdLife Partner, said Marco Lambertini, BirdLife's CEO. "He was a great champion of IBAs and his enthusiasm and dedication to their conservation was instrumental to their success in the Western Hemisphere". Donal gave Audubon momentum through his legendary fundraising efforts. These successful drives included the annual Birdathon that he and his wife, Katie, conducted for 28 consecutive years during which they raised more than \$3 million for Audubon's bird conservation initiatives—from saving waterfowl, shorebirds, and grassland birds to restoring the California condor and strengthening protections for Long Island Sound. "Katie and I have a secret to our successful Birdathons," he said. "Our leader is always a member of Audubon's field staff. They are the real heroes of our Birdathons." When Donal stepped down as Audubon's chairman in 2003, his friends and former fellow directors raised \$5 million to establish the Donal C. O'Brien Jr. Chair in Bird Conservation and Public Policy to catalyze Audubon's bird conservation agenda across the country and throughout the Western Hemisphere. To no one's surprise, Donal led fundraising efforts to implement Audubon's Important Bird Areas program, which identifies and conserves the essential sites our birds need to breed, winter, rest, and refuel during migration. As a former duck hunter, Donal grasped early on the significance of the four flyways that inspired Audubon's latest strategic plan, in 2010. "In [Audubon president] David Yarnold's second week on the job, Donal told me, 'We have to have a hemispheric vision of flyways for all migratory birds,' " says Glenn Olson, a longtime

friend and the Donal O'Brien Chair in Bird Conservation and Public Policy. "Donal was peerless," says David Yarnold. "His vision for Audubon to organize itself by the 'flyways' that birds use was an idea that was ahead of its time. It's not now; it's the heart of our strategy and Donal will always be its champion." In 2010 he was awarded the 51st Audubon Medal, joining the likes of Walt Disney, Rachel Carson, and Robert Redford. Says Holt Thrasher, Audubon's current board chair, "Donal provided some of the steadiest and most inspired leadership that Audubon ever had." This post has been adapted from an editorial on [Audubon Magazine Online](#)