

BirdLife's History in Objects, #12: A Migratory Bird's-Eye View of the World

Title

From pole to pole, a staggering eighty thousand kilometres round trip. That is the migration that Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* make *every year*. Imagine flying through storms on that epic journey over the entire Atlantic Ocean with a wingspan of less than one metre.

Image not found

The Arctic Tern's staggeringly long migration is **by a long way the furthest of any animal**. Photo: Simon Stirrup

Such is the wonder of bird migration, in which an estimated 50 billion birds embark on immense and hazardous journeys along many different routes, or flyways, worldwide each year. Along the way they encounter many difficulties before reaching their destinations and being able to breed: White Storks dodge bullets in the Mediterranean; soaring vultures may have to avoid poorly-located buzzing electrical transmission lines in the Rift Valley; and Swainson's Hawks have to spot patches of sparsely remaining Pampas grasslands in South America to refuel on insects. But from their perspective in the sky these birds see no political obstacles, national borders or boundaries and this is a significant point. By fostering bonds between nations, migratory birds act as valuable ambassadors for our shared natural heritage and encourage effective international conservation.

Connections

Migratory birds have long been important in many diverse cultures. Aborigines in Australia perform "sandpiper dances" to celebrate the return of migratory waders, heralding the first rains of the wet season. **Northern Bald Ibis** were followed on their migration by pilgrims to Mecca. But for a while their entire migratory routes were not known to conservation science:

The threatened Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* breeds only at isolated sites in NE Europe. For more than ten years many BirdLife Partners have painstakingly worked for the protection of the breeding grounds. But out of their hands when migrating south, the conservation scientists on the ground could only hope that the birds would return next year. However in 2007, following five years of investigation, researchers from BirdLife Partners managed to trace the birds to Senegal, which has now signed an agreement to protect Europe's rarest migratory songbird.

Impressive migratory routes of bird species, covering all three of the world's major flyways

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/migration-routes-300x139.jpg>

Migratory birds go beyond borders

The conservation of a huge group of species with massive ranges requires a coordinated response across many countries and continents. This is why BirdLife uses a 'flyways' approach- conserving a species by involving local people from many countries across the whole length of its migratory route.

BirdLife International, with Partners in 116 countries, is ideally placed to achieve this. In 1978, BirdLife founded the Migratory Soaring Birds Committee (MBC), the first global initiative for migratory birds; and in the next 10 years carried out more than 140 projects in Europe and Africa, building networks and supporting existing conservation bodies, and founding NGOs in countries where there had been no previous organisations devoted to the study and conservation of birds.

Money follows birds

Interactive map showing all the work done by BirdLife Partners along the African-Eurasian flyway

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http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/b2t_project_map-214x300.jpg

As well as twinning arrangements with protected area managers for expertise and experience sharing, joined-up conservation for migratory birds allows the transfer of money from affluent countries where birds breed, to poorer countries with important passage and wintering sites.

Joined-up conservation to protect the pampas

In 2006, four BirdLife Partners teamed up to protect the Pampas Grasslands found in the southern cone of South America, where 137 Important Bird Areas have been identified in this rapidly degrading habitat, crucial for refuelling migratory birds in the Americas flyway. Aves

Argentina, Aves Uruguay, SAVE Brasil and Guyra Paraguay formed an Alliance, aided by funding predominantly from agencies and foundations worldwide, and have successfully implemented a model for cattle ranching there that combines the sustainable production of certified beef (which is benefitting local farmers) with conservation of the grassland.

“The success has drawn attention elsewhere in the world including North America and Russia”, says Rob Clay, Senior Conservation Manager for BirdLife’s Americas Regional Programme.

Inspiration. Photo from BirdLife's Spring Alive celebration, 2010

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http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/spring_alive_2010.jpg-300x199.jpg

So next time you see a migratory bird overhead, spare a thought for its epic journey across national borders, the other people from other countries who will be watching the birds, and all the conservation work that is being done along its flyway.

*Throughout BirdLife’s history, the need to cooperate globally has been realised. BirdLife International’s work on migratory birds has now grown into the **Flyways** conservation programme which works along all three of the world’s major flyways, and is now sponsored by the world’s biggest nature event, the British Birdwatching Fair. This article is part of a series celebrating BirdLife’s 90th Anniversary.*



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2. **Ever fantasised about owning your own private tropical island?**

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7. **Bringing the Hammer Down on Governments to Save Nature**
8. **If a bird calls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it really exist?**
9. **Forest Conservation has no Boundaries**
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