

ACRES FOR ANTPITTAS: WISCONSIN'S INTERNATIONAL BIRD CONSERVATION PROGRAM

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Abstract. Recognizing the need to actively engage birders in conservation, the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative sponsored birding trips—birdathons—to Ecuador in 2006 and 2007. The birdathons raised money to support protection of designated Important Bird Areas that provide wintering habitat for neotropical migrants. To ensure the events had a strong conservation component, participation from several entities, including Ecuadorian and international conservation organizations, was necessary. Ultimately, thousands of dollars were raised for acquisition of important bird habitat in Ecuador, benefitting both native species and neotropical migrants. The birdathon model can be used to generate support for conservation of important bird habitats in Latin American and the Caribbean.

Key Words. birdathon, conservation, Important Bird Area, Neotropical migrant, Tropical Andes, Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative.

ACRES PARA ANTPITTAS: PROGRAMA DE CONSERVACIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE AVES DE WISCONSIN

Resumen. Reconociendo la necesidad de observadores de aves participar activamente en la conservación, la Iniciativa de Conservación de Aves de Wisconsin patrocinó viajes - Avethon (Birdathons) - a Ecuador en 2006 y 2007. Los Avethons reunieron fondos para apoyar la protección de designadas Áreas Importantes para Aves que proveen hábitat invernal para migrantes neotropicales. Para asegurar que los eventos tuvieran un componente energético de conservación, fue necesaria la participación de varias entidades, incluyendo organizaciones ecuatorianas y internacionales. Ultimadamente, miles de dólares fueron reunidos para la adquisición de hábitats importantes para aves en Ecuador, beneficiando ambas especies nativas y migrantes neotropicales. El modelo Avethon puede ser utilizado en generar apoyo para la conservación de importantes hábitats de aves en América Latina y el Caribe.

INTRODUCTION

The Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative (WBCI) is a statewide alliance of 160+ partner organizations dedicated to conserving Wisconsin's rich birdlife. Recognizing that more than half of Wisconsin's 238 species of breeding birds are considered neotropical migrants (Matteson and Foote-Martin 2004), in 2005 WBCI established an International Committee to advance conservation of migrant birds on their wintering grounds in Latin America. Built upon the twin pillars of education and conservation action, WBCI International collaborates with partners on bird conservation projects in Latin America. Because the program does not have a budget, innovation is necessary to generate needed funds. In 2006 and 2007, WBCI International sponsored conservation birding trips—"birdathons"—to Ecuador. These events

raised thousands of dollars to protect important bird habitat for resident and migrant species of concern. In addition, new partnerships have been established between WBCI, international conservation organizations, Ecuadorian Non-government Conservation Organizations (NCO's) and the bird tourism industry, setting the stage for future conservation action.

METHODS

WBCI's tropical birdathons are based on the fundamental premise that birders want to support conservation efforts for birds they enjoy. By following a basic formula, the birdathons offered the opportunity to support on-the-ground conservation of important bird habitats in Latin America while providing a great birding experience. We adhered to the following steps:

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1. Birding trips were offered at cost by a professional bird tour company,
2. In addition to covering individual trip expenses, each participant was required to donate \$500 (U.S.) to a pre-identified NCO. Participants were also encouraged to raise additional funds.
3. Donations were sent to a U.S.-based conservation organization for transfer to the recipient NCO.
4. The NCO assumed responsibility for utilizing donations for habitat protection. There was no evaluation or reporting requirement.

WBCI worked with both the tour company and the Ecuadorian NCO to develop the trip itinerary. Trips were designed to showcase NCO conservation accomplishments and opportunities. In both instances, NCO staff provided educational presentations about their organizations.

Donations were sent directly to U.S.-based international conservation organizations. Financial agreements between those organizations and their Ecuadorian partners enabled transfer of donated funds to NCO accounts. According to an agreement with WBCI, the NCO's utilized (or will utilize) donations to purchase land based upon protection objectives and opportunities.

RESULTS

JOCOTOCO BIRDATHON

In September 2006, twelve birders from the Upper Midwest traveled to Ecuador to support land acquisition efforts of the Jocotoco Foundation (JF), an Ecuadorian bird conservation organization that owns and manages eight reserves strategically located throughout the country. The trip was operated by Tropical Birding (TB), a Quito-based bird tour company that provides expert guide services worldwide. TB was attractive to WBCI because it has support for conservation built into its business charter. The America Bird Conservancy (ABC), a prominent international bird conservation organization with a strong presence in Latin America, served as recipient and manager of donated funds.

Participants visited JF-owned and managed reserves. Destinations included the Tapichalaca and Buenaventura Reserves, both designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) (Birdlife International and Conservation International 2005). Each reserve has a lodge to accommodate overnight visitors, which made these sites conducive to this type of tour. Visitor's fees constitute a significant percentage of the

reserves' operating budgets, magnifying the conservation impact of visitation.

Ultimately, the birdathon raised \$14 000 (U.S.) for JF land acquisition. Those funds financed a 56 ha expansion of the Jorupe Reserve, a Jocotoco property that protects a critically endangered remnant of dry, deciduous forest located near the Peruvian border. The reserve supports populations of several globally-threatened birds as well as wintering neotropical migrants including Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*), Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) and Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*).

MINDO BIRDATHON

In August 2008, twenty-two birders from the Upper Midwest traveled to Ecuador on a second WBCI-sponsored birdathon. The event was designed to support the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation (MCF), a non-profit conservation organization focused on habitat protection and promotion of avitourism in the Chocó Bioregion of northwest Ecuador. As with the 2006 event, TB managed trip logistics. The World Land Trust-U.S., an affiliate of the United Kingdom-based World Land Trust, served as recipient and manager of donations.

MCF owns and manages two small (less than 100 ha) conservation properties, Milpe and Rio Silanche. Milpe lies within the Los Bancos-Milpe IBA (Birdlife International and Conservation International 2005). Both reserves provide hiking access for visitors. Lodging was provided by a "bird friendly" facility—Tadayapa Bird Lodge—located near the community of Mindo. The itinerary included visits to both MCF properties as well as visits to sites throughout the IBA. The event raised \$19 000 (U.S.) for MCF land acquisition efforts. Complexities inherent to land acquisition in Ecuador have stymied new acquisition to date, but the MCF continues to explore possibilities to expand existing reserves, both of which support wintering neotropical migrants including Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) and Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*).

DISCUSSION

The Tropical Andes of northern South America constitute the global epicenter for biodiversity, harboring the highest number of species for a variety of taxa including plants, amphibians and birds, as well as exceptionally high rates of endemism for those groups (Mittermeier et al. 2000). It is one of the two most threatened ecosystems in the neotropics (Stotz et al. 1996). Recognizing

the Tropical Andes also provide important wintering habitat for numerous North American migrant birds, including species considered national conservation priorities—Olive-sided Flycatcher, Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*), Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) and Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*) (Rich et al. 2004)—the ecosystem takes on global importance in regard to conserving biodiversity. Working with partners, WBCI birdathons accomplished local and international conservation objectives by generating acquisition funds to help expand sites important to Ecuadorian birds and neotropical migrants.

A number of factors contributed to the success of the birdathons. First, a well established bird tour company is needed to coordinate trip logistics. Only an organization with “in-country” knowledge can effectively handle the details of itinerary development and skillfully manage issues that materialize during international travel. Moreover, a key ingredient to event success is the willingness of the tour company to offer trips at cost. It would be more difficult to recruit “conservation birders” and require a \$500 donation if trips were offered at typical commercial rates. As travel costs inevitably rise this arrangement will become increasingly important.

Second, working through a U.S.-based conservation organization with extensive Latin America experience is essential. Those organizations have the knowledge to assess the biological merits of projects and the mechanisms necessary to manage and transfer donated funds.

Finally, promoting the trip as a “conservation birding” endeavor served to recruit birders with an interest in actively supporting conservation. Participant commitment to raising additional money for habitat protection was remarkable, with thousands of additional dollars raised. Virtually all participants indicated the experience strongly influenced their perspective on the need to support conservation of tropical habitats. Many strengthened their resolve to continue to do so.

Given the relative paucity of funding for conservation in Latin America, support provided by the birdathons—more than \$30 000 (U.S.) from both events—is clearly beneficial for facilitating protection of important habitats. However, there is also tremendous value associated with providing exposure to the hardscrabble world of bird conservation “south of the border.”

Conserving migratory birds that do not recognize geopolitical boundaries is inherently challenging. The anticipated loss of habitat associated with projected population increases in Latin America and the Caribbean over the

next 40 years does not augur well for neotropical migrants or the region’s remarkable resident avifauna. Resource agencies and conservation organizations will not be able to stem long-term declines of neotropical migrants without strong public resolve coupled with adequate resources. Birders need to be part of the solution. Their untapped conservation capacity is considerable, their participation essential for success.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks to Dr. Robert Ridgely for opening the door to participation in international bird conservation. Special thanks to the American Bird Conservancy and the World Land Trust—U.S. for providing event sponsorship and managing donations. Richard Moore (WLT-U.S.) was extremely helpful and supportive throughout the formative stages of both events. A debt of gratitude is owed Iain Campbell and the excellent guides from Tropical Birding, Inc. for their commitment to conservation through birding. Andy Paulios provided helpful comments on the manuscript. And finally, my deepest admiration and thanks to the dedicated staff of the Jocotoco Foundation and the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation for their undaunted efforts to save the remarkable bird habitats of the Tropical Andes.

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