

Audubon Onward!

AUDUBON'S IMPACT IN UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER

2024





Audubon Onward!

Flight Plan is about protecting birds, and at the same time, protecting people and our planet by advancing a generation-shaping agenda to the forefront of conservation.

DEAR FRIENDS,

This report invites you to look more closely at our collective impact over the past year to protect birds and the places they need in the Upper Mississippi River. *Audubon, Onward!* provides important updates and conservation gains through our forward-looking plan to address the mounting threats of climate change and biodiversity loss—threats that not only impact birds, but people and the planet, too. The following pages underscore an urgency of now, and Audubon’s bold response.

Over the past half-century, we have lost three billion birds in North America—an alarming trend skewed heavily toward migratory species. This precipitous loss is a powerful statement about the condition of our planet and a harbinger of things to come if we don’t act strategically and decisively.

Here at Audubon Upper Mississippi River, birds like the Bobolink, Cerulean Warbler, and Red-headed Woodpecker are projected to lose much (and in many areas, all) of their of their breeding range in Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri if climate change continues at its current pace.

It is this urgency that led us to launch our *Flight Plan*, Audubon’s bold five-year strategic plan, which codifies our evolution into a truly hemispheric organization.

Beyond boundaries and across vast distances, most migratory birds only spend a fraction of their annual cycle in our region. To protect them, we need to literally meet them where they are. By studying their vast migrations and extensive breeding ranges, we can zero in with precision to address the dizzying array of conservation challenges they face on the wing.

It is your investment and our shared impact in Audubon Upper Mississippi River that will allow us to achieve hemispheric outcomes—this is how we will bend the bird curve.

Thank you and onward!

With gratitude

Rob Schultz

VICE PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
AUDUBON UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER
SERVING MINNESOTA, IOWA, AND MISSOURI

BIRDS TELL US. THIS IS HOW WE LISTEN.

Thanks to game-changing science and new digital technologies, we are narrowing knowledge gaps that have long plagued the world of bird conservation. The Bobolink, for example, travels about 12,500 miles round-trip annually, south

from its northern breeding grounds in Canada and the northern U.S., across the Gulf of Mexico, to its wintering grounds in South America. Last year, a Bobolink tagged in Minnesota’s Prairie Pothole region flew past Motus towers located in

Ohio and North Carolina. These towers captured critical data revealing secrets of the birds’ migratory adventures, giving new revelations and insight into where, when, and how long they sought habitats needed to provide safe rest and food.



Red-headed Woodpecker
Photo: Zachary Vaughan/Audubon Photography Awards

Audubon’s *Flight Plan*:

A Powerful and Dynamic Story of Migratory Science, Climate Action, and Community Building

OUR SCIENCE IS CLEAR. We are in a critical moment for birds, people, and the planet. Climate change and biodiversity loss have reached crisis levels, yet the window of opportunity remains open—if we act now.

The most ambitious strategic effort in our history, Audubon’s *Flight Plan* establishes our vision for shaping a world where birds and people thrive, elevating Audubon as a global conservation leader. *Flight Plan* sets five-year milestones in key areas to track progress towards our long-term vision to “bend the bird curve,” in other words, to halt and reverse the alarming decline of birds.

Our recognition of the interconnectedness of people, place, and climate led to the development of four milestones we intend to reach over the next five years: Habitat Conservation, Climate, Policy, and Community Building.

MILESTONES:

Flight Plan harnesses the full power of Audubon—including on-the-ground staff across the Western Hemisphere, centers and sanctuaries, and local chapter partners—by focusing on a set of shared outcomes for greater collective impact towards our vision.

 **HABITAT CONSERVATION**

Using science to identify, protect, and conserve 300 million acres of bird habitat across the Americas

 **CLIMATE ACTION**

Deploying 100 gigawatts of renewable energy and storing 30 billion tons of carbon through natural climate solutions

 **POLICY LEADERSHIP**

Pairing diplomacy with advocacy to develop and implement bird-friendly solutions

 **COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Creating a diverse network of bird lovers working together to advance our shared vision

AUDUBON’S HEMISPHERIC APPROACH TO CONSERVATION directs our efforts to the places where birds need us most and to all the places they call home; their seasonal migration across the Western Hemisphere means Audubon also works from boreal Canada to the Carolinas to Chile and beyond.



Prothonotary Warbler Migratory Journey

- Winter Range
- Summer
- Year-Round
- Journey of a Tracked Bird

Audubon’s Bird Migration Explorer provides a clearer-than-ever look at bird migration and the incredible journey of individual species. Here we see how the iconic Prothonotary Warbler requires us to work beyond our borders to ensure it remains safe and healthy throughout its annual cycle.

ILLUSTRATOR: DAVID ALLEN SIBLEY

In the past year, we have made progress towards our milestones—much of which has touched down in our region—and developed operational plans to continue driving this work forward.

Guided by our *Flight Plan*, we are engaging in conservation activities on 116,650,000 acres across the Americas and influencing 50 renewable energy generation and transmission projects totaling 34 gigawatts—enough energy to power roughly 25 million homes.

HIGHLIGHTS OVER THE PAST YEAR INCLUDE EFFORTS TO:

- **Launch Audubon’s Conservation Ranching Program in Minnesota and Wisconsin**, building on our success in fourteen other states where more than 100 ranches covering nearly 3 million acres have earned status as Audubon Certified bird-friendly land.
- **Fund seven new projects for protected areas in Perú and six in Bolivia** through *Conversa Aves*, totaling over 1.9 million acres.
- **Break ground on the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion**, the single-largest ecosystem restoration project in U.S. history; this project will restore and strengthen up to 28,000 acres of wetlands in Louisiana, providing climate resiliency benefits to local communities.
- **Begin new engagement on a \$10 billion transmission project** spanning seven Midwestern states representing up to 20 gigawatts.
- **Deliver 10,000 acre-feet of water to benefit Great Salt Lake and Jordan River** through local partnerships and co-management of the Great Salt Lake Watershed Enhancement Trust.
- **Convene 11 Indigenous Guardians and leaders from five First Nations**, key partners on our work in Canada, at Hog Island Audubon Camp in Maine for knowledge exchange and training opportunities.

Audubon Upper Mississippi River is ahead of the game and leading Audubon’s *Flight Plan* by amplifying our voice and implementing innovative conservation efforts aligned with our hemispheric vision to identify connected, climate-resilient places across the hemisphere where we are focusing our efforts for the greatest impact.

Audubon’s Work in the Upper Mississippi River. Unified by the Power of Birds.

Through our *Flight Plan*, we commit to achieving significant milestones that will demonstrate measurable impact on the climate and biodiversity crises. We are pleased to report back to you that your investments supported the following impact over the past year:



HABITAT CONSERVATION

Conserving quality, connected, and climate-resilient bird habitat through our Wings over Working Lands



Left: Audubon staff at the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Photo: Rob Schultz/ Audubon

→ Through **Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR)**, we work directly with ranchers to manage their property in ways that benefit birds, while helping them succeed in the lucrative grass-fed beef market. This fall, Minnesota’s first ranch earned the Audubon Certified bird-friendly seal, informing shoppers that its products come from land managed for birds and biodiversity. We secured a \$2.5 million from the USDA to expand the program into Iowa and further into Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin.

→ Like ACR, Audubon’s market-based **Bird-Friendly Maple program** helps landowners—in this case, maple syrup producers—generate profits while managing their property for birds. This year, we received nearly \$500,000 from the USDA to launch this program, successfully pioneered in the Northeast, into Minnesota and Wisconsin.

→ Audubon Upper Mississippi River completed the second of three years of bird monitoring for the **Prairie Island Indian Community (PIIC)**, which is working to ensure that land management decisions preserve cultural interest and species of concern. We are also supporting the PIIC in its work to inventory and plant trees in community spaces to create healthy habitat and advance environmental justice benefits for the PIIC.

Right: Staff members at an Audubon prairie restoration field site at Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge in northwest Minnesota. Photo: Rob Schultz/ Audubon





CLIMATE ACTION

Accelerating renewable energy and restoring forests, grasslands, and wetlands

→ In alignment with Audubon’s *Birds and Transmission* report, **we are engaging with developers of Midcontinent Independent System Operator North transmission lines to influence decision makers** to take the welfare of birds into consideration. We will use our GIS mapping science and other information to ensure that transmission line design and

construction have minimal impact on birds. We met with every developer across the region and will continue working with local Audubon chapters, advisory board members, and supporters to advance our strategy.

→ Also in alignment with the *Birds and Transmission* report, **we supported a bill in Minnesota that encourages the use of grid-enhancing technologies (GETs).**

GETs, such as dynamic line ratings, power flow controllers, storage, and re-conductoring, are tools used to modernize and expand existing transmission capacity.

→ **Audubon Upper Mississippi River began working in a coalition to support the use of highway rights-of-way as utility corridors.** This past spring, we helped pass legislation that allows transmission lines alongside highways, a strategy that both advances clean energy while keeping the region’s birds safe.



POLICY LEADERSHIP

Advancing our *Healthy Birds, Healthy Planet* policy agenda

→ **During the 2024 legislative session, nearly \$2 million was allocated for our work to improve the floodplain and upland forests of southeast Minnesota**—habitat that is falling victim to invasive species. Work will include hands-on invasive plant control, forest stand improvements, tree plantings, mowing, and prescribed fires, with the goal of helping floodplain forest habitat to expand while enabling adjacent upland forests to support birds and other wildlife.



Signing celebration with Minnesota Governor Tim Walz for legislation authorizing the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund Ballot Initiative. Photo: Office of Governor Tim Walz

→ More than 30 years ago, Minnesotans voted to dedicate a portion of state lottery proceeds to conservation, which has provided over \$1 billion for our great outdoors. Last year, we successfully advocated for a bill to create the constitutional amendment question required to continue this critical funding source, and to create a small grants program that will enable greater accessibility for small, rural, and diverse communities. In addition, we led a communications campaign to drum up support, including distribution of educational materials, support for local Audubon chapters’ and allies’ outreach, letters to the editor, social media, and action alerts. **The issue was on the ballot this year, and we are pleased to report that Minnesotans voted in favor of the amendment by a wide margin, securing this important conservation funding for another generation.**

 **COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Working together across the hemisphere to advance our shared vision



From Top: A volunteer tends to the native plant garden at the Audubon Center at Riverlands. Photo: Sydney Walsh/Audubon

An aerial view of the Audubon Center at Riverlands. Photo: Sydney Walsh/Audubon

Artist James K. Schmidt's "Alton Flyway" mural for the Mississippi Landing building in Alton, Illinois. Photo: Rob Schultz/Audubon

→ **This year, targeted areas at Riverlands were planted in native seed as part of the newly launched Great Rivers Pollinator Habitat Partnership (GRPHP).**

This partnership is being spearheaded jointly by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Audubon, which also installed a greenhouse at the center where we will grow native plants for habitat restoration and use to promote the use of native plants in home, community, and commercial landscapes.



→ Local and national Audubon staff, along with donors and supporters, legislators, and community leaders celebrated the **100th Anniversary of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge** in La Crosse, Wisconsin. For over a decade, Audubon has been working on this refuge and the surrounding region to restore critical bottomland forest habitat for birds on the Mississippi River.

→ Other Community Building activities over the past year include **Lights Out Minnesota**; an **"I Bird, I Vote"** get-out-the-vote campaign at community events throughout Minnesota; and the unveiling of an **Audubon Bird Mural** in Alton, Illinois, that draws attention to the threat of climate change to birds.



We are deeply grateful for your continued commitment to Audubon and our mission to protect birds and the places they need—in the Upper Mississippi River and beyond. In the first year of *Flight Plan*, we have made significant progress towards our habitat and climate milestones. We could not have gained such momentum without you. The challenge before us is clear. Act now or risk a future with skies silenced with loss. With your help, we will bend the bird curve and make a sustainable impact for birds across the hemisphere. **This is our moment.**

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UPPER MISSISSIPPI
RIVER

Indigo Bunting.

Photo: Raymond Dake/Audubon
Photography Awards

Cover: Prothonotary Warbler.

Photo: Peter Brannon/Audubon
Photography Awards