

North American Bird Conservation Initiative



Advancing Integrated Bird Conservation in North America

Spring 2014

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The All-Bird Bulletin

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA): Thirteen Years of Hemispheric Bird Conservation

Guy Foulks, Program Coordinator, Division of Bird Habitat Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

In 2000, responding to alarming declines in many Neotropical migratory bird populations due to habitat loss and degradation, Congress passed the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA). The legislation created a unique funding source to foster the cooperative conservation needed to sustain these species through all stages of their life cycles, which occur throughout the Western Hemisphere. Since its first year of appropriations in 2002, the NMBCA has become instrumental to migratory bird conservation in the Americas.

The mission of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative is to ensure that populations and habitats of North America’s birds are protected, restored, and enhanced through coordinated efforts at international, national, regional, and local levels, guided by sound science and effective management. The NMBCA’s mission is to achieve just this for over [380 Neotropical migratory bird species](#) by providing conservation support within and beyond North America—to Latin America and the Caribbean.

The NMBCA complements other funding sources such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act by providing resources for migratory landbird conservation as well as funding for migratory birds that depend upon wetland habitats outside of North America. The legislation requires that at least 75 percent of the grant funding support activities outside of the United States, where significant need for scarce conservation resources exists.

The NMBCA program supports a wide variety of conservation actions, including habitat protection and restoration, research, monitoring, outreach, and education. Over the last 13 years, the NMBCA program awarded \$50 million dollars in grants



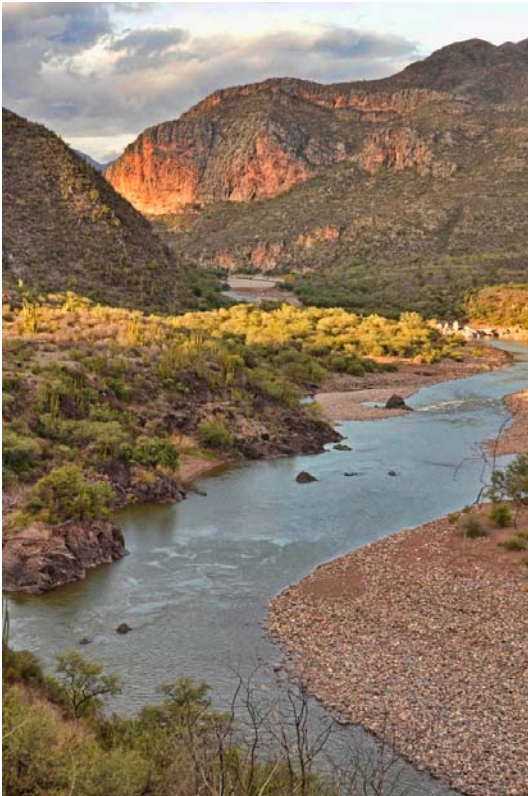
Cerulean Warbler, a Neotropical migrant, is a USFWS Bird of Conservation Concern and listed as Vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. / Robert Royse

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Aros/Yaqui Rivers Habitat Conservation

Megan Southern, Coordinator, Northern Jaguar Project

The 50,000-acre Northern Jaguar Reserve is located 125 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border in the western foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental. The landscape features a variety of biotic communities, including oak and riparian woodlands, extensive areas of Foothills (Sinaloa) thornscrub, montane shrublands, and grasslands. The reserve is located near the center of a broad transition zone between the Nearctic and Neotropical faunal realms and supports flora and fauna with Sonoran, Chihuahuan, Sinaloa, and Madrean affinities. The reserve also includes more than 20 miles of frontage on the Río Aros, which is the longest undammed river in northwest Mexico and part of an inland corridor for Neotropical migratory birds.



Río Aros and the Northern Jaguar Reserve. / Aaron Flesch

The Northern Jaguar Project (NJP) is a binational non-profit formed in 2003, to preserve and recover the world's northernmost population of the Jaguar, its unique natural habitats, and all native wildlife under its umbrella of protection. Together with our Mexican partner Naturalia, NJP purchased and now co-manages the Northern Jaguar Reserve — which lies in the ecological heart of the area that, in recent years, has had the highest number of northern Jaguar sightings, including females and cubs. We maintain this protected core reserve and work with ranchers, schools, and local communities to promote conservation.

In collaboration with, Naturalia and ornithologist Dr. Aaron D. Flesch of the University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources and the Environment, NJP began a broad effort to document biodiversity on the reserve, assess the distribution, residency, breeding status, and abundance of birds, and to evaluate the merits of a proposed federal Natural Protected Area (NPA). While the coastal migratory corridor for birds in western Mexico has been relatively well studied, our efforts are among the first to assess bird status and distribution along the inland migratory

corridor and in this extremely rugged and remote region in the state of Sonora. Moreover, we also provided the first description of a bird community in Foothills thornscrub vegetation, which despite being one of the most dominant vegetation communities in Sonora, has been the focus of little study and is not represented in Mexico's federal system of NPAs.

One of our long-term goals is to foster the safe passage of Neotropical migratory birds on the reserve by promoting greater survival and abundance. We are also conserving resident breeding populations by promoting greater understanding of the habitat needs of birds and by protecting, enhancing, and restoring high-quality habitats. We have specifically targeted three groups of species: long-range Neotropical migrants that traverse an inland flyway and are species of conservation concern, short-range migrants that breed in the neighboring southwest U.S., and tropical migrants that winter to the south and breed in Foothills thornscrub and riparian woodlands.

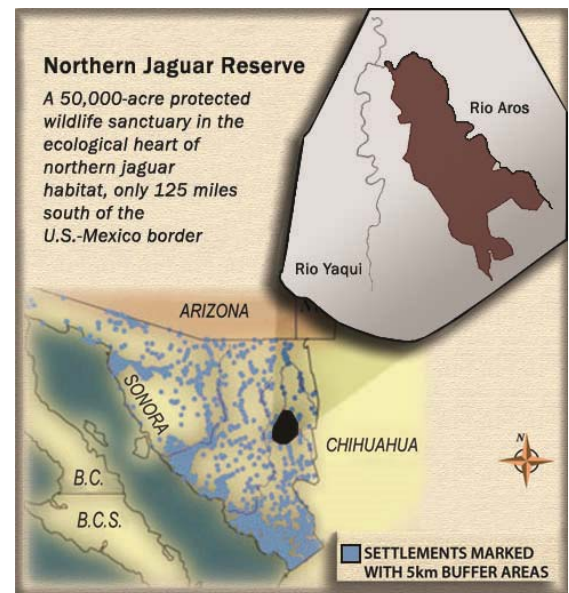
Since 2007, with support from the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA), we conducted extensive bird surveys that spanned all seasons and major vegetation communities on the reserve. We have documented 214 bird species on and around the reserve and, based on the observed abundance distribution, estimate as many as 257 species may be present. We recorded 13 species of conservation concern in Mexico—including Bald Eagle and Military Macaw which are endangered in Mexico and found at the extreme southern and northern edge of their breeding ranges respectively—and an additional 24 species of conservation concern in the neighboring U.S. Approximately half of all species were winter residents or passage migrants and another 15 percent were summer residents that migrate from the south. In comparison, only 31 percent were permanent residents.

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We have documented populations of 10 bird species that breed or winter on the reserve in locations to the north of previously described limits of their geographic ranges, including Fan-tailed Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Common Black-Hawk, Cassin's Kingbird, and Slate-throated Redstart. Other notable breeding species on the reserve include Yellow-green Vireo, Least Grebe, Blue Mockingbird, and White-striped Woodcreeper. These species use extensive riparian woodlands, beachfronts, and Foothills thornscrub along a vast lowland corridor formed by the Río Aros and Río Yaqui, which provides a warm subtropical environment unlike any other in east-central Sonora.

The area surrounding the reserve faces a range of threats, including the clearing of native vegetation, intentional planting and subsequent invasion of exotic buffelgrass, overgrazing by domestic livestock, and large-scale mining and hydroelectric dam projects that could alter hydrologic regimes and flood large areas. In response, we have focused on land purchase, bird and vegetation monitoring, habitat restoration techniques on neighboring private ranches and the reserve, and community outreach to local ranchers, schoolchildren, and educators—all of which has been made possible with NMBCA support.

In 2012, we negotiated with the owner of a ranch next to the reserve to establish a 227-acre cattle-exclusion zone for the protection of a plant community dominated by Mexican Ebony, Catclaw Acacia, Sweet Acacia, Palo Blanco, Mesquite, Bursera, and Ocotillo. This plant community is specifically important to birds that are nectivores and aerial and leaf-gleaning insectivores. This is the largest cattle exclusion accomplished to date, and since it is adjacent to the Northern Jaguar Reserve, expands the reserve's protected habitat. With support from NMBCA, we are conducting vegetation and bird monitoring at cattle-exclusion sites and control plots to assess the ecological effects and conservation benefits of this management practice.



In heavily grazed areas on the reserve and adjacent ranches, restoration efforts have focused on erosion control and water harvesting through gabion construction. Gabions are permeable rock micro-dams designed to slow stream flow, retain soil moisture, and accelerate riparian habitat recovery. In 2011, we built rock gabions across 627 acres, in areas identified as key conservation targets due to the exceptional bird, amphibian, and fish diversity. The gabions are situated perpendicular to the flow of water in head-cuts (i.e. abrupt vertical drops) in areas that have lost vegetative cover. This approach has successfully benefitted soils adjacent to the Río Aros. With the continuing drought in the region, we have constructed gabions on an additional 380 acres of the reserve and adjacent ranches since 2012.

Throughout all of our activities, we are investing resources in building local conservation employment opportunities. One of the reserve's resident cowboys, Laqui Duarte, has taken on increased responsibilities for maintaining and checking our network of motion-triggered wildlife cameras. Since 2010, he has assisted ornithologists in the field during seasonal surveys, month-long arrival/departure censuses of peak migration, and ongoing molt-migration research. Laqui also helps coordinate local work crews and oversees gabion construction. His growing experience in bird and wildlife observation, as well as his extensive knowledge of the landscape, highlights our long-term objective to train local people to carry out and sustain this project.

We are also fostering improved relationships in the community at large, making clear connections between habitat conservation, scientific monitoring, and community education. This includes a long-term commitment to strengthening relationships with local ranchers. Our project illustrates the value of working collaboratively with neighboring ranchers on habitat restoration while simultaneously conserving priority habitat for birds by establishing a large protected reserve along the Río Aros. We know that continuing efforts by private organizations such as NJP and Naturalia, along with a strategic partnership with the NMBCA, are essential for realizing bird conservation in northern Mexico at large scales.

For more information, contact the Northern Jaguar Project at information@northernjaguarproject.org or visit www.northernjaguarproject.org.