

# THE RECOVERING AMERICA'S WILDLIFE ACT: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY, A GLIMMER OF HOPE?

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There can still be heard in Kansas some primal sounds that speak to attentive humans the very essence of wildness. One is the clatter of migrating Sandhill Cranes, rising with the sun in their thousands from their roosting areas at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge or Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area and returning at dusk. Another is the marvelously resonant distant booming of prairie-chickens assembling in the spring on their ancestral leks to mate and assure the continuation of the species. People—even people who ordinarily would pay little attention to nature—can be drawn to see the Bald Eagles that come down in the fall with the migrating waterfowl, and now are even staying to nest in Kansas. Many people have their favorite bird: the echoing song of the busy, perky, inquisitive Carolina Wren, the descending notes of the meadowlark in the field by the road or behind the house. There are rarer experiences with guests who turn up briefly in migration—the sweet, fluting call of the Wood Thrush, the essence of the deep deciduous woods, more common in our eastern counties.

You can still hope to hear Wood Thrushes singing in Kansas—you used to hear them every spring. But to do so now, you have to work a lot harder than you used to. The Wood Thrush population nationally fell by 60 percent between 1970 and 2014, leading Partners in Flight to add this thrush to its Yellow Watch List of declining birds.

That population crash would be appalling even if it were an exception. But it's not an exception. Depressingly,

it's become common. In 2019, a report in the journal *Science* showed that over the last five decades, North America has lost 30 percent of its birds.

That's three billion birds. Gone.

As one of the authors of the report, ornithologist Peter Marra of Georgetown University, put it, after a revelation like that, conservationists can't just go back to business as usual.

A bill making its way through Congress last year and this would have provided a chance to avoid going back to business as usual, giving states an extraordinary tool to help bring back birds and other wildlife. While the processes of making legislation may seem to the public excruciatingly slow, H.R. 2773, the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, first introduced April 22, 2021, finally passed the House on a bipartisan vote of 231-190 on the evening of June 14, 2022 (Representative Sharice Davids of Kansas was a sponsor; Representatives Tracy Mann and Jake LaTurner voted nay, and Representative Ron Estes did not vote). In the first week of April 2022, on a bipartisan 15-5 vote, the US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works advanced RAWA to the Senate floor as S.2372. Senators Jerry Moran and Roger Marshall co-sponsored the revised bill in the Senate. This bill has been called the most significant wildlife conservation bill seen in nearly half a century.

Its beginnings go back to 2006, when Congress mandated that each state must write a Wildlife Action Plan

and submit it for approval to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Most wildlife conservation money now comes from license fees and taxes paid by hunters and anglers. That money is spent to protect and increase the numbers of game animals. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act would have provided dedicated money that originates in general federal funding to protect *not only wildlife you can hunt, but also non-game species*. At the time, in 2006, Kansas was ahead of the game: the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) had adopted the Kansas Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan in 2005. They were able to revise and expand this earlier effort as the Kansas State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) in 2015 (see Rohweder, M.R. December 2015. *Kansas Wildlife Action Plan*. Ecological Services Section, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism in cooperation with the Kansas Biological Survey. 176 pp.).

Through their Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool, part of the state's Wildlife Action Plan, the KDWP had identified fourteen terrestrial habitats, nine of which focus on prairie habitats, three on wetlands, and two on forests. The Kansas wetland habitats so identified are centered on Playa Lakes in western Kansas and on the two large wetlands in central Kansas, Cheyenne Bottoms and the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Both Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira have been designated as Wetlands of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention, with Cheyenne Bottoms also declared a site of hemispheric importance by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network and a Globally Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. Approximately 45 percent of shorebird species in North America use these wetlands during migration. The survival of these birds absolutely depends on the continued existence of these habitats for rest and refueling on their long migrations. But drought years and the continued depletion of water available to the wetlands because of excessive irrigation and drought pose an existential threat the very survival of these unique resources.

As for the prairie biomes, the tallgrass prairie once occupied approximately 150 million acres (60 million hectares or 230,000 square miles) of North America. However, conversion to other land uses has made this grassland a globally endangered resource. According to a report from the World Wildlife Foundation, in 2014 alone the Great Plains region lost more acres of grassland than the Brazilian Amazon region lost rainforest. Estimates of remaining tallgrass prairie range from 1% to 18% of its former distribution. But we here in Kansas still have a share in the only expansive and intact remnant of this grassland: the Flint Hills in Oklahoma and Kansas (3.8 million acres).

In view of these statistics, it comes as no surprise that losses of grassland bird species are among the greatest ecological disasters of our time. The World Wildlife Federation has found populations of four key species of grassland birds — Thick-billed Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*), Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*), Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*), and Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) — have declined as much as 80 percent since the 1960s due to much of their grassland habitat being destroyed. According to a 2007 report by The National Audubon Society, losses of even two of the most familiar, typical Kansas grassland species — the Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savaarrarum*)—subject of another article in this issue of *Prairie Wings*) and Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) — have amounted to 62 percent and 75 percent, respectively, of their global population in the past 40 years.

Surveying the fourteen Kansas habitats for its Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) catalog, KDWP classified all species listed as endangered or threatened at the federal or state level, or with global conservation status rank of G1 or G2 as Tier 1; all remaining SGCN were assigned to Tier 2. Species that are listed as “Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)” in Kansas in at least one of the 14 habitats identified

Some of the species identified by the KDWP in their Kansas Wildlife Action Plan as “Species of Greatest Conservation Need.” These creatures would be among the beneficiaries of the Recovering America’s Wildlife Action Plan (RAWA), if it had been included in the recent budget bill. We can hope—for their sake and others equally deserving—that RAWA may have better success in the coming session of Congress.”

All photos by Dave Rintoul.



The Black-footed Ferret  
(*Mustela nigripes*)



Piping Plover  
(*Charadrius melodus*)

by the KDWP include the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, the Snowy Plover, the Piping Plover, the Whooping Crane, the Least Tern, and the Eastern Spotted Skunk. Tier 2 SGCNs include the Swift Fox, Black-footed Ferret, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Yellow-faced Gopher, Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle, Long-billed Curlew, Greater Prairie-Chicken, Swift Fox, and most grassland-nesting passerines. Several species of bats and many fish and mussels also appear as Tier 1 or Tier 2 SGCNs in one or more of the fourteen habitats. While some of these might escape the notice of many members of the public, several can be seen as “iconic” species.

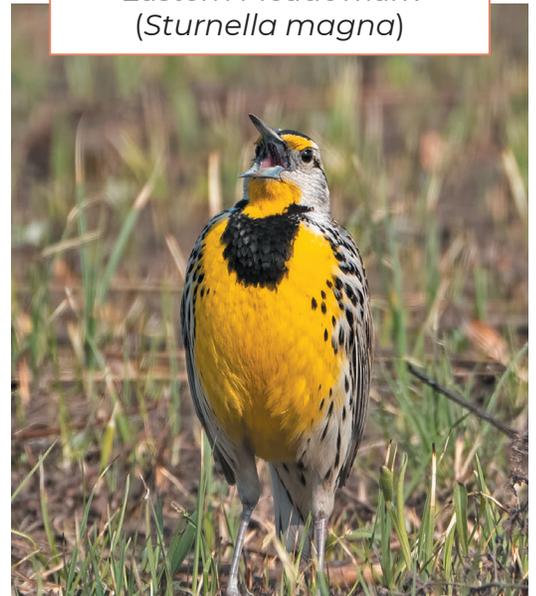
Funds from the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act could have helped all those creatures, and many others. The Recovering America’s Wildlife Act would have provided

\$1.3 billion a year to states, territories and tribes for purposes of conserving, restoring, and protecting local wildlife and habitat to carry out their plans. That is some \$1.3 billion a year. Kansas’s share is estimated at \$17.6 million per year. The beautiful part is that the money is already in the U.S. Treasury.

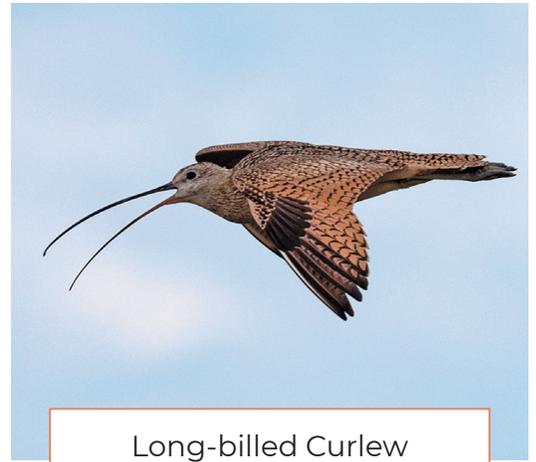
Those funds could have been used for the broad-scale habitat creation projects that would bring back the birds that require grasslands — Eastern Towhees, Field Sparrows, Blue-winged Warblers, Indigo Buntings — which have suffered proportionately some of the greatest declines in species. It could have supported research on population collapse that is not well-understood, as well as funding measures that are known to be needed, but currently too expensive to undertake. It could have



Lark Bunting  
(*Calamospiza melanocorys*)



Eastern Meadowlark  
(*Sturnella magna*)



Long-billed Curlew  
(*Numenius americanus*)

assured more extensive conservation measures on private lands by compensating landowners for participation in restoring and preserving habitat.

And there would have been broader-scale benefits to passing the act. As it has been shown that intact prairie is an economically significant carbon sink, there was an extraordinary opportunity to at once improve habitat, helping to bring back bird populations, and at the same time take meaningful action against climate change. Funds from the Recovering America's Wildlife Act could have been used to support the protection of playas in western Kansas, further assuring migrating waterfowl and shorebirds a place to feed and rest during migrations. They could have helped to maintain the great wetlands in the center of the state, controlling

invasive plants and devising ways to assure the continued availability of essential amounts of water.

This was an unprecedented chance to do something that is good for wildlife and also good for people. As Audubon of Kansas is showing with its Celebration of Cranes providing opportunities to view sandhill and endangered whooping cranes, and the Kansas Lek Treks Prairie-Chicken Festival sponsoring visits to prairie chicken booming grounds, viewing nature can be a source of tourist dollars, as well as a way of educating the public about the value of these habitats and their denizens, not only emotionally, but economically.

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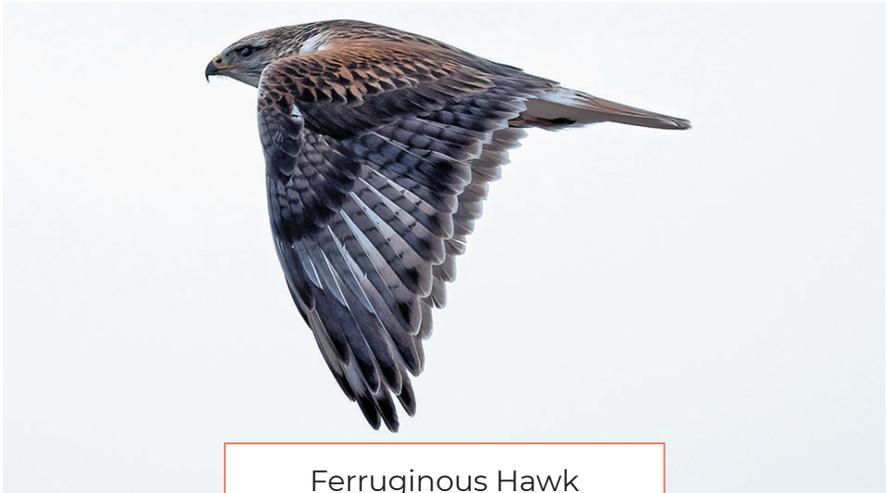
Snowy Plover  
(*Charadrius nivosus*)



Chestnut-collared Longspur  
(*Calcarius ornatus*)



Sharp-tailed Grouse  
(*Typanuchus phasianellus*)



Ferruginous Hawk  
(*Buteo regalia*)

funding to protect *not only wildlife you can hunt, but also non-game species*—species often considered devoid of “economic importance,” but nevertheless occupying crucial roles in the web of life.

The culmination of years of effort, research, lobbying, and dedicated commitment to devising State Wildlife Action Plans, identifying SGCNs, designing measures to arrest their decline, and preventing further thoughtless destruction of crucial habitats, RAWA came before the Senate as S.2372. However, as a result of last-minute objections by some senators to technical issues of funding, the texts of H.R. 2773 and S. 2372 were left out of the \$1.7 trillion fiscal 2023 spending bill passed

just before Christmas. “There were a series of good-faith offers on the pay-for, and it just didn’t come together in time,” said Collin O’Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation that lobbied hard for the wildlife bill. “This remains the most important wildlife legislation in 50 years, and we have to get it done one way or another.” RAWA had substantial bi-partisan support. Sources suggest that, as the stalemate had little to do with the actual policy contained within the bill, it can be hoped that re-introduction of the bill in the next Congress might have more success.

AOK will lobby hard for a successful outcome next time around.