



Left-right: Caleb Putnam, AGL Michigan bird Conservation Coordinator; Troy Peters, AGL Engagement Manager; Stephanie Beilke, AGL Conservation Science Associate; (behind) Nat Miller, AGL Director of Conservation; Justin Stokes, National Audubon Director of Legislative Affairs; Bill Heck, NAS Regional Director, Mississippi Flyway North; Brian Merlos, AGL Michigan Field Organizer; Brooke Bateman, Director of Climate Watch. Photo by Constance Rubin.

Preserving Our Favorite Birds Will Require Policy Advocacy & Conservation Projects *By Connie Rubin, Canton (OH) Audubon Society Board Member*

A meeting of Great Lakes Audubon chapters with Audubon staff from Chicago and Washington D.C. took place Nov. 3-5, 2017, at the Greenbelt Cultural Center in N. Chicago. This is a not-so-brief report of that meeting, which focused (like a laser) on **building chapter capacities** for (1) policy advocacy and (2) conservation projects.

As preamble, Audubon's new Great Lakes Initiative grew out of national's *2016-2020 Strategic Plan* and includes a Regional Office and staff in the Chicago area. Providing stronger chapter services and encouraging citizen science are the goals. I encourage you to read the Strategic Plan at <http://strategicplan.audubon.org>.

According to Thomas Lovejoy, Professor of Environmental Science and Policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., "If you take care of the birds, you take care of most of the big problems in the world." As Audubon members we bring "a centrist perspective" to political advocacy and a deep loyalty to our organization, which itself has a strong and respected legacy of conservation focusing on preserving birds and their habitats. All are central to our continuing success and the reason the capacity-building meeting was convened.

Focusing on Advocacy--Nov. 4, 2017 presentations:

- Attendees included Audubon members representing Waukegan IL, Michigan Audubon, South Bend IN, Detroit, Oakland County MI, Buffalo NY, Chicago, as well as Columbus and Canton OH. Many have staff, offices, and nature centers or bird sanctuaries, but the activities showcased at the meeting are doable by both large and small chapters.
- **Rebecca Sanders, Executive Director of the Great Lakes office**, gave an overview of the *2016-2020 Strategic Plan*. The office is planning to host a Great Lakes regional meeting for members every other year, on the off-years of our national meeting.
- Our organization's main goal is "to improve quality of life for people by protecting birds" by focusing on 5 conservation priorities: coasts, including the Great Lakes in the Mississippi Flyway; working lands, water, bird-friendly communities, and climate.
- Our organization includes 462 chapters, 23 state and regional offices, and 41 nature centers & sanctuaries, including 2 in Ohio—Grange Insurance Audubon Center in Columbus and Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm in Dayton.
- A "Conservation Scorecard" is being developed to measure how close we are to reaching prescribed metrics related to bird numbers, people involved, etc.
- A new Chief Network Officer will support chapters & members and encourage growth of chapters as well as membership diversity. A national policy department, with regional staff, is also being developed. **Audubon's National Legislative Affairs Director is Justin Stokes**, who has 10 years of experience working in Congressional offices.
- Most members of Congress (MoCs) are not familiar with our chapters and our priorities. They want to see "the people behind the policies" being advocated, so we need to step up our game and develop relationships with all the MoCs in our areas. National Audubon's outreach to Ohio Senator Rob Portman has helped make the renewal of the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act a non-partisan effort! National's outreach to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue is raising his understanding and support for the important conservation components of the Farm Bill.
- Audubon's 2017 policy agenda includes *defending* the EPA, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from drilling, the sage grouse, funding for conservation projects through the Land & Water Conservation Fund, and the Endangered Species Act...all of which are under attack. Our policy agenda also includes *taking the offense* on climate legislation, coastal protection, the Gulf Coast, and the Farm Bill. Updates on these initiatives are at Audubon.org.
- The EPA is on Audubon's policy radar because the new Director has proposed a 30% cut in the overall budget, including a **98% cut in funding for Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**. The Great Lakes provide fresh water to 85 million people. We can take pride that 5,000 Audubon members have already "weighed in" opposing the proposed funding cuts. Keep up the pressure!
- The largest source of conservation funding in the federal budget is within the Farm Bill.
- We are all encouraged, as individuals and chapters, to "become a champion for birds and conservation." Our MoCs are more likely to act if constituents call and visit them. Our interactions with birds give us powerful stories to tell about why we care about conservation. These stories will positively influence our MoCs.
- Meeting attendees took part in a very effective role-playing exercise appropriate for local chapters to replicate. If you would like **Advocacy Training** for your chapter or a

group of chapters, **contact Troy Peters**, Great Lakes Engagement Manager, at (312) 453-0230 x2004.

- The regional office is planning monthly Policy Calls with chapter leaders. Watch your email for time, dates.

Focusing on Conservation—Nov. 5, 2017

- Participation by meeting attendees of a shrub planting at the Greenbelt Forest Preserve was cancelled due to rain; however, Chicago staff and Boy Scouts completed the project, and had the mud on their pants and boots to prove it!
- Solving a car problem prevented me from attending a presentation on marsh bird and water monitoring projects taking place in Michigan to save the Black Tern. It is an example of using community science projects to create a conservation success.
- Conservation targets of Audubon's Great Lakes Initiative are marsh as well as land birds, stopover habitats, and water quality. Wetlands have declined by 50%-90% in the Great Lakes states.
- Sources/considerations that can be used to determine the best areas for restoration/preservation include water birds in Important Bird Areas (IBAs), e-bird, USGS identification of invasive species, areas of high nitrogen and phosphorus runoff, general suitability of area.
- Decreased hunting has caused a decrease in conservation funds available; therefore, birders may need to support additional taxes on binoculars, scopes, other birding supplies to make up the shortfall.
- When it comes to climate change, temperatures have already exceeded those predicted by the Paris Climate Agreement! But concern is not just about temperatures. Some places are becoming dryer, but the Great Lakes are becoming wetter as a result of climate change.
- Birds are reacting to climate change: the abundance of Eastern Phoebes and Purple Finches have already shifted. Rusty Blackbirds, "of-concern" in the Great Lakes and nationally, have shifted their migration 126 kilometers northward. 314 bird species are considered "at risk" in this century due to climate changes.
- Climate Sensitivity Categories include (a) stable (b) climate-threatened, and (c) climate-endangered. By 2080 it is expected that 188 bird species will be climate-threatened and 126 will be climate-endangered.
- A new Audubon app is due out in the spring of 2018!

Volunteers Needed for January & May Climate Watch Project

By Connie Rubin, Canton (OH) Audubon Society Board Member

Following the release of Audubon's *Birds and Climate Change Report* in September 2014, members and the public asked "how can we help?" The outgrowth of those requests is the Climate Watch Program, details of which are at www.audubon.org/conservation/climate. As a result of feedback from Audubon members, the program has been made much simpler for citizen activists. You can even do it in your car!

The Climate Watch Project is science-driven “monitoring with a purpose.” Target species with a strong prediction of change, wide geographic coverage, easily identifiable and charismatic have been chosen. Audubon has already created maps, expanded the viewing times to Jan 15-Feb. 15 and May 15-June 15. You only have to do the monitoring *once* in each month-long time frame (two times total). It is estimated that one volunteer could complete the monitoring within 2-3 hours.

A training video and 12-page Training Manual, including a list of resources, and personal phone calls are available to support member participation. This project lends itself to partnerships with colleges, scouts, other environmental organizations interested in conservation projects.

Becoming an Effective Advocate for the Birds

By Connie Rubin, Canton (OH) Audubon Society Board Member

Utilizing Audubon’s 462 chapters to influence national and state policy decisions in support of preserving bird habitat, and thereby improving the climate for people too, is a national organizational priority. A meeting of Great Lakes regional chapter leaders with national and regional Audubon staff in early November 2017 included advocacy training. Similar training for your chapter is available by contacting **Troy Peters**, Great Lakes Engagement Manager, at (312) 453-0230 x2004.

The first step to becoming an effective champion for birds and conservation is to think about your own birding “story.”

- When and what got you interested in birds?
- Why do you care about them?
- Why do you care about the environment?

While your story might not at first “roll easily off your tongue,” it is important to think about and revise it. Keep it simple! Make it personal and local and hopeful! (We can have a positive effect, and need their help. We’re building a movement and need their help.) **Your goal is to connect them to the birds we care about!** Don’t worry about using scientific information in your story; most people don’t need it. We don’t even have to agree on the effects or causes of climate change to help birds!

Here are additional ways suggested to improve your advocacy:

Begin to develop a positive relationship with elected officials and their staff by first inviting them to come on a hike, educational program, bird walk, or meeting. Invite them to bring their family or grandchildren along. Show them your enthusiasm for birds and the outdoors. Many of them are likely to share that enthusiasm.

Before you meet with them to discuss policy here are important steps to take:

- **Research the official.** Know which committees they are on, what their legislative priorities are, what business they were in, organizations they have supported. Review their website, join their Facebook page, and collect newspaper articles in which they are mentioned. Try to find positive connections between their interests and Audubon’s.

- **Develop talking points and an agenda.** Plan your visit. Strategize who will attend and what you will ask for. Keep your group small. Those representing Audubon should live in the official's district!
- **Open with an overview**—who you are, why you are there...for the birds, including simple facts about your Audubon chapter. Focus on requesting only one action, based on what will soon be up for a vote as well as local and national priorities. That means you will have to pay attention to the legislative calendar and know when a pending bill is in the House or the Senate, and when votes are scheduled.
- **Weave in a personal story** (see first paragraph) that relates to the issue at hand and exemplifies your values.
- Anticipate what you will do if you are given only 3 minutes to make your pitch. Anticipate questions the legislator might have; if you don't know the answer, don't fake it. Say you will get the answer, and then do it. You want to become a *trusted* resource for *reliable* information.
- You can usually schedule a meeting by calling or emailing the legislator's office. Some have forms to fill out online. Be willing to meet with a staff member, and be flexible when it comes to time. Treat staff just like you would treat the official, with deference and respect. Staff are your friends, and may be more knowledgeable about issue details than his/her boss.
- Don't come to the meeting with a chip on your shoulder. As Mom always said, "You'll attract more flies with honey than vinegar." Begin your meeting with a compliment about his/her support for recent environmental legislation, if possible.
- **Don't give Al Gore's video to a Republican!** Do provide a summary handout to the legislator that includes high points of your presentation, names of attendees, how to get in touch with the chapter or President. Assign someone in the group to take notes.
- Thank them and take a photo.
- Write a thank you note to the person you met with, again showcasing major talking points. If they take the action you requested, write another thank you, and consider writing a letter to the editor. Elected officials love positive publicity!
- Put the official (or the staff member you met with) on your newsletter mailing list.
- Additional advocacy resources are available on our national website, <http://wa.audubon.org/conservation/take-action-and-advocate-effectively>, including an article entitled "Talking Birds & Climate with Elected Officials."