

Condors Soar Over the 2nd Annual International Important Bird Areas Conference

By Jillian Butler

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS (IBA) coordinators and affiliates from around the world gathered in Big Sur, California, in March for the second Annual International Important Bird Areas conference. There could not have been a better place. The sights and sounds of spring on the California coast welcomed the many new members of the Audubon and BirdLife International IBA network.

Participants traveled from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, the United Kingdom, and across the United States to exchange knowledge and share ideas on the current status and future of the IBA Program and bird conservation.

The United States IBA Program began in the mid-1990s and continues to grow with forty-six active state programs. New York State was the first to publish an IBA book and the only state to adopt a bird conservation area law based on the program. Worldwide, there are IBA programs on six continents and 156 countries. A true reflection that yes, IBAs are the global currency for bird conservation.

A highlight of the conference was the unveiling of the World Bird Database, a database that is accessible to IBA coordinators from around the world and allows them to enter and query data on all IBAs. Workshops covered topics on monitoring,

fundraising, partnerships, education and outreach, and conservation planning. It was an opportunity for participants from diverse geographical and organizational perspectives to share the unique challenges and successes of their own IBA programs.

Beyond the presentations and discussions, participants were also fortunate to view California Condors flying in the wild directly above the conference center. There are 17 condors inhabiting the mountains surrounding the conference center in Big Sur. It was a first sighting for most attendees who were anxious to add the magnificent bird to their life lists. Unfortunately, a bird cannot count as a "lifer" unless it has been in the wild for over ten years – who knew? On the life list or not, watching the condor soar on its nine-and-a-half-foot wingspan was beyond impressive.

Fossil records show that at one time the condor's range spread from California across the southwest to Florida and north to New York State! By the 1980s, condors were on the brink of extinction. With only 27 condors remaining in the world, the US Fish and Wildlife Service embarked on a reintroduction program. The reintroduction program has brought the world population up to 185, with 63 condors living in the wilds of California and Arizona. Success of the



(Top) Tagged condor peers over a ledge on the coast of Big Sur, California.



(Right) Conference participants strain for a glimpse of the coveted condor.

condors return to the wild was shown this April when a pair of released condors successfully incubated and hatched an egg.

The International Important Bird Area Conference reminded participants that they are an integral part of a network of people around the world

working to protect birds and their habitats. The Important Bird Area Program has provided the framework for successful conservation around the world, and the conference was a source of knowledge and inspiration for participants dedicated to bird conservation in their local areas.

Building Backyards for Birds

By Michael Burger, Ph.D.

IT HAPPENS EVERY YEAR. Some new species show up in my backyard that I have never seen there before. So far this Spring, the first-timers have been Field Sparrows, Pine Siskins, and Fox Sparrows, but I'm sure there will be others as migration heats up. Maybe it's just the statistical reality that if you watch long enough, you'll see novel things. Or, maybe it's because I have been trying to make my yard a more hospitable place for birds.

It's helpful, perhaps, to consider why they are there. Species like cardinals and Carolina Wrens stay year-round, while others like phoebes return each Spring to breed and still others like juncos are here only in the winter. The majority of the birds that use my backyard, though, are migrants. They likely have spent an exhausting night flying to or from their breeding areas and come sunrise are looking for a place where they can stop for a day or more to rest and refuel. Whether breeding, wintering, or migrating, birds need places where they can find the right kind of food and cover. In other words, they need appropriate

habitat, and backyards can offer that.

Thoughtful landscaping and gardening is the most effective way to provide good habitat. The key is diversity. To provide both food and cover to a number of birds, landscape in a way that will result in a structurally diverse habitat and supply food at different times of the year.

Although many seed-eaters will partake of offerings of sunflower and thistle seeds, many other species will be looking for berries or insects. Plant a combination of fruiting or berry-producing trees, shrubs, and ground cover along with flowers to achieve a mix of tall, medium height, and short vegetative structures. In addition to the fruits they afford, these plants will provide a diversity of places for insectivores to forage. Select trees and shrubs that will provide food at different times of the year. For example, plant dogwoods whose fruits will be utilized during the Fall migration and hawthorns that will be used in Winter or during Spring migration.

Whenever possible, use native plants, as these are more likely to be



The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is one species that will benefit from healthy backyard habitats.

adapted to your local climate and are not a threat to "escape" to surrounding wild areas only to become the next problematic invasive species. Piles of rocks, brush, logs, and leaves will provide foraging areas for additional species and further enhance your backyard habitat. In addition to foraging options, a diverse habitat structure will provide cover and nesting opportunities for the greatest variety of birds. Water sources, nest boxes, feeders, and dust baths can also

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increase the suitability of your backyard for birds.

To be a truly bird-friendly habitat, a backyard must provide one more element in addition to food and cover, and that is safety. Take steps to make sure that you are not luring birds to a dangerous area. Reduce or preferably eliminate their exposure to pesticides and other potentially harmful yard chemicals. Recent research has found that yard chemicals are a major cause of bird deaths in New York state. Keep cats indoors; putting bells on their collars does not eliminate the threat they pose to wildlife.

To learn more about how to make your backyard a healthy habitat for birds and other wildlife, visit <http://www.audubon.org/bird/>.