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WISCONSIN RESPONDS TO GLOBAL BIRD REPORT

(Madison, WI) In Wisconsin, whether you make your home in an urban apartment or a northwoods cabin, birds are the wildlife we experience most often. They inspire us with their music and add color to our lives, but a report released this week from BirdLife International warns residents against taking birds for granted.

The report, *State of the World's Birds* (www.birdlife.org/sowb/index.html), details the decline of global bird populations and calls the loss an environmental barometer for the health of the planet at large. Conservationists from the Natural Resources Foundation, Madison Audubon Society, and the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative are responding to the report by raising awareness of the value and vulnerability of Wisconsin's birds.

Charlie Luthin, executive director of the Natural Resources Foundation notes, "Our wetlands, lakes and rivers - and our unique geography between the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes - make Wisconsin a globally important place for breeding, feeding and migrating birds. Unfortunately," continued Luthin, "loss of habitat, pollution and global warming all threaten the birds that enhance our quality of life."

According to Andy Paulios, coordinator of the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative, "birds are more easily observed than other wildlife species and so bird monitoring efforts help us understand what's happening to our forests, grasslands and wetlands in Wisconsin." In short, if the birds are in trouble, there's reason to be concerned about the other species that share their habitat. And, according to Paulios, "since Wisconsin's birds migrate to and from ecosystems from South America to the arctic, the health of bird populations here also gives us an indication of what's going on in other places like Alaska and Peru."

So what are our birds telling us about the health of the planet? 200 species, or a quarter of all bird species in the United States, have declined in population since the 1970s, according to the National Audubon Society. "Grassland birds as a group are undergoing drastic declines," noted Karen Etter Hale, executive secretary of Madison Audubon Society, the state's largest Audubon chapter.

“Some species, like the Greater Prairie Chicken, Western Meadowlark and Henslow's Sparrow have declined by over 90% in the last century,” continued Etter Hale. “Many birds of the open oak woodlands like the Whip-poor-will and Red-headed Woodpecker that used to be common in Wisconsin are now a rare sight in many areas. Loss of bird habitat isn’t just bad for birds, it also impacts the quality of our water, air, and communities,” she concluded.

While the threats are real, several conservation efforts in Wisconsin prove that it’s not too late to reverse the trend and protect our birds. One example is Wisconsin’s participation in the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program. The IBA program is a global effort to identify and protect sites that are critically important breeding, feeding and migratory habitat for birds. To date, 86 IBAs have been established in Wisconsin.

“We are now developing conservation strategies at high-priority IBAs to ensure that they continue to provide exceptional habitat for birds into the future,” said Yoyi Steele, Wisconsin Important Bird Areas Coordinator. “It’s especially important that we protect migratory bird habitat in Wisconsin,” noted Steele.

Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative partners have drafted a stopover plan that identifies high value locations in Wisconsin where migrating birds rest and re-fuel. “These birds, some which weigh only a few ounces, travel thousands of miles on their migration. If we want to continue to enjoy their visits, we have to protect the places where they rest and refuel,” concluded Steele.

Lending a hand this spring, the Natural Resources Foundation established a statewide Bird Protection Fund to support conservation efforts in Wisconsin. Each year, the Bird Protection Fund supports collaborative projects throughout Wisconsin that are prioritized by leading bird conservationists in the state. “We created the fund to address urgent threats to Wisconsin’s birds – threats that require both a collaborative response and the funds to enact solutions,” added Luthin.

This year, the Fund is supporting numerous conservation initiatives in Wisconsin, including the IBA program, whooping crane restoration, protection of migratory habitat on Wisconsin’s Great Lakes shoreline, and conservation research on birds, like the Golden Winged Warbler, that migrate to Wisconsin from South and Central America, among other things.

“Whether you’re an avid birdwatcher or someone who just enjoys birds in your backyard, you can make a difference by joining local bird conservation and monitoring efforts, landscaping your property for birds, and donating to the Bird Protection Fund,” concluded Paulios. Contributions to the Bird Protection Fund can be made online at www.wisconservation.org.

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The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin is a 501c-3 non-profit organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. For more than twenty years, the Foundation has worked with citizens, businesses, non-profits and the government to promote the protection and enjoyment of Wisconsin's public lands, waters and wildlife. Learn more and donate online at www.wisconservation.org.

The Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative is 165 partners working cooperatively to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation in Wisconsin. Find out more at www.wisconsinbirds.org

Madison Audubon Society, an official chapter of the National Audubon Society, has protected more than 3,000 acres of wildlife habitat in south central Wisconsin. More information can be found at www.madisonaudubon.org