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**PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PROTECTS
WISCONSIN'S BIRDS IN COSTA RICA**

(Madison, WI) This spring, millions of birds are returning to Wisconsin from distant winter haunts. Hungry and tired from thousands of miles of perilous travel, our birds can count on Wisconsin to provide the habitat they need. But that is not always the case south of the border, where more than half of Wisconsin's 238 breeding bird species spend the winter. Throughout Latin America, deforestation and incompatible development are squeezing Wisconsin's birds into ever smaller wintering grounds, threatening their long-term survival.

"Despite significant conservation efforts in Wisconsin, global bird populations continue to decline," Charlie Luthin, executive director of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin noted. Loss of habitat, pollution and global warming threaten the birds that enhance our quality of life. "Our migrating birds spend only about half of their lives with us, so protecting them requires a 'whole-life-cycle' approach," Luthin continued.

Recognizing the need to act internationally on behalf of Wisconsin's birds, the Foundation has joined public and private partners at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) – through the generosity of the Bell Family Foundation – and Neenah Paper to safeguard important migratory bird wintering habitat on Costa Rica's Osa peninsula. The three partners recently made a combined contribution of more than \$60,000 to the non-profit Friends of the Osa. "It's a significant gift to our reforestation and habitat protection work," noted Dr. Adrian Forsyth, president of the group's board of directors, "and we are grateful for the support." Forsyth continued, "the long term conservation of migratory songbirds is only possible because of such north-south partnerships."

Jutting into the Pacific Ocean, the Osa peninsula harbors the last remaining old growth rain forest on the west coast of Central America. Enormous trees, some more than 1,000 years old, provide critical habitat for hundreds of species of birds, including 54 species that call Wisconsin home. Eighteen of those species are state conservation priorities, three are listed as threatened and one is endangered.

"The Osa peninsula is important for Wisconsin's birds, but it's also a global conservation priority because, among other things, it is home to the largest remaining mangrove forest in Central America," Forsyth added. Presence of the mangrove heightens the conservation value of wildlife habitat and rainforest on the peninsula. "There is some evidence that the mangrove will buffer the oceanic impact of rapid climate change and help preserve this safe haven for the tropic forests and wetlands found here," he said.

According to Craig Thompson, regional land leader at the DNR, the state's involvement was inspired by a national movement called Southern Wings - a partnership of conservation agencies that support funding for bird conservation projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) launched the effort to facilitate state government involvement in protection of wintering habitat for migratory birds. Late last year, DNR Secretary Matt Frank appointed Thompson to coordinate Wisconsin's participation in the Southern Wings initiative.

"While this is the first time we've supported wintering habitat protection in Latin America for our declining songbird populations, the DNR has supported waterfowl breeding habitat conservation projects in Canada for nearly two decades," Thompson said. He stressed that no taxpayer dollars were used and noted that the Bell Family Foundation provided the DNR's \$23,600 contribution to the project in Costa Rica. Thompson added, "This is an enormous step forward for migratory bird conservation in our state."

Luthin noted that the combination of corporate dollars, individual gifts, and contributions from the DNR demonstrates a new commitment to protecting Wisconsin's migratory birds. "No matter how much good work we do for birds here in the state, we can't keep them here year-round," he said. Luthin hopes this project will encourage others to get involved. "People now understand that the habitat loss is real and that we can't really protect our birds without protecting their winter homes as well," he added. "The threats are sobering, but the collective response has been inspiring," Luthin concluded.

Wisconsin manufacturer Neenah Paper has made a multi-year commitment to the Osa partnership. "Partnering with the Natural Resources Foundation, the DNR and Friends of the Osa is exciting because together we will have a direct impact not only on the Costa Rican rainforest, but on threatened and endangered species that also happen to call Wisconsin home," said Byron Racki, director of marketing, fine paper at Neenah Paper.

"This is a big step for everyone involved," Thompson said, "but most of all, it's a big step forward for our birds." The group is already making plans to offer additional support this year and potentially expand their efforts. "Ultimately, we hope to work with partners across the Western Hemisphere to help protect wintering habitat vital to the future of our birds," concluded Thompson.

The Foundation, the DNR and other conservation organizations are celebrating the return of Wisconsin's migratory birds this spring with a special benefit event for the Osa project at the Milwaukee County Zoo on April 24th. The event, "Orioles and Ocelots: Wisconsin's Costa Rica Connection," will feature a hors d'oeuvres reception and a presentation by Dr. Forsyth on the conservation of the Osa peninsula. In addition to his role at the Friends of the Osa, Dr. Forsyth is an internationally acclaimed conservationist and author of nine books, including Portraits of the Rainforest. Registration and event details are on the Foundation's Web site at: www.wisconservation.org.

Editor's Note: Print-resolution photos from the Osa peninsula, including images of a check presentation and wildlife in Costa Rica are available upon request. To request photos or to arrange interviews with anyone in this release, please contact Jeffrey Potter at the Natural Resources Foundation, jeffrey.potter@wisconsin.gov or 608-261-4392.

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The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. For more than twenty-four years, the Foundation has worked with citizens, businesses, non-profit partners 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.