



Western Sandpipers. Photo: Milo Burcham

About Important Bird Areas

Coordinated by BirdLife International, the Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program is a global initiative which aims to identify and conserve the most important places for bird populations. The foundation of the Important Bird Areas Program is its emphasis on science-based identification, assessment, and conservation of birds and the habitats they need to survive. It relies on local stewardship and at the core focuses on engaging individuals, private landowners, local communities, businesses, partner organizations, and government agencies in site conservation.

As the United States partner of BirdLife International, the National Audubon Society administers the Important Bird Areas Program in the U.S., in coordination with local entities. Since launching this proactive effort in 1995, more than 2,600 Important Bird Areas have been identified that encompass close to 380 million acres.



Sandhill Cranes. Photo: Larry Lynch/Audubon Photography Awards

Biological Significance

Important Bird Areas are distinct areas that provide essential habitat for one or more species of birds in breeding, wintering, or migration.

Important Bird Areas are identified for their value to species that are

- ◆ Threatened or endangered
- ◆ Restricted to a particular biome or region
- ◆ Restricted to one habitat type
- ◆ Occurring at high densities during some portion of the year

Identified for their high value to birds, these areas represent key sites for conservation and careful management decisions.

Birds have been shown to be effective indicators of biodiversity in other animal groups and plants – especially when used to define a set of sites for conservation.

Important Bird Areas are large enough to safeguard a viable population of a species, group of species, or entire avian community during at least part of its life-cycle but are small enough to be conserved in their entirety.

IBAs can be a few or thousands of acres in size, public or private ownership, protected or unprotected lands.



Ferruginous Hawk. Photo: Shlomo Neuman/Audubon Photography Awards



Identification and Prioritization

Important Bird Areas are identified using robust, standardized criteria. To qualify, each proposed site undergoes a rigorous review process by a committee of ornithological and conservation experts who consider scientifically defensible data-driven evaluations of bird populations and habitat. Sites are further evaluated on a larger geographic scale, considering bird populations and conservation concerns, to be ranked as a Global or Continental Important Bird Area.

Ways in Which Important Bird Areas Can Be Used to Help Avian Species

Guiding Policy and Land Management Decisions

The designation of a site as an Important Bird Area does not confer legal or regulatory status. Instead, participation in local conservation is entirely voluntary on the part of landowners and land managers.

IBA boundaries serve as an initial spatial guide for planning purposes and help identify areas that warrant prioritization for protection and conservation actions. However, they should not be perceived as absolute, definite boundaries. Rather, boundaries should be considered approximates of the critical habitat areas. These data are complementary to important on-site surveys that may be required for conservation planning, an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement, used in energy siting, transportation planning, or other development.

Understanding the specific biological values associated with each Important Bird Area location can guide site-specific recommendations. Audubon's general recommendations regarding IBAs are as follows:

- ◆ Audubon recommends avoidance as the most effective means of protection. To the greatest extent possible, rare, unique, or sensitive habitats should be off limits to activities that cause habitat loss/alterations and disturbances.
- ◆ Where avoidance is not feasible, impacts should be minimized through scientifically defensible practices. Compensatory mitigation should be considered as a last resort and occur in a manner where existing habitat on or away from the project site is protected or enhanced.
- ◆ Audubon encourages developers and land management entities to consult with wildlife experts, including Audubon staff and local chapters, to help inform study and siting decisions.

Focusing Conservation Efforts

Important Bird Areas potentially increase conservation funding opportunities through state, federal and foundation grants. Identified using rigorous criteria, IBAs are natural locations to concentrate limited on-the-ground restoration funds and volunteer efforts, including bird monitoring via eBird, an online database for reporting bird observations.

IBAs build partnerships via a community of supporters working to monitor, restore, and/or conserve these critical habitats for birds and other wildlife. IBAs allow for conservation across boundaries and facilitate collaboration across owners and land managers. Through community engagement, awareness of the importance of these sites builds long-term conservation and protection of these critical areas.

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Visit audubon.org/important-bird-areas for location information, boundaries, and site profiles.