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Op-Ed Contributor

Songs From the Wood

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I SAT on my farmhouse's back step in the low light of dawn, watching two blackpoll warblers — slim, streaky and hyperkinetic — flit through the new leaves of the maples, which the sun turned into tiny lenses of green.

My trees were a way station for these birds, moving between their winter home in South America and their destination to the north — the boreal forest, the vast shield of spruce and aspen, of muskeg and marsh, that stretches from Newfoundland to western Alaska. Larger than even the Amazon, North America's boreal zone is one of the biggest intact ecosystems left on the planet, with 1.4 billion acres in Canada alone, most of it still in immense, interlocking tracts that make up a quarter of the earth's remaining original forest.

With its southern fringe running just across the border from northern New England and the upper Great Lakes, the boreal forest is largely unknown to most people in the United States. Its most visible product, however, is now flooding our backyards with welcome color and song. The boreal forest is the continent's matchless bird nursery: some three billion individuals of nearly 300 species breed there, from trumpeter swans to delicate warblers, migrating across the entirety of the United States to return there. In autumn, they scatter to the farthest corners of the hemisphere, leading some scientists to suggest that the boreal has a greater global impact than perhaps any other single ecosystem.

Despite centuries of logging and development, most of the boreal is still intact. But over the next decade, timber, energy and mineral development will accelerate across the region, including a natural-gas pipeline through the heart of the Mackenzie Valley in the Northwest Territories that will speed the extraction of oil from the vast tar-sand deposits beneath Alberta's boreal forests.

Because this region is so huge, though, we have a chance to get it right this time — to upend the typical approach to conservation. Instead of protecting a few patches of natural habitat, we have the opportunity to save immense, functioning ecosystems as the matrix, with islands of carefully managed development in between.

This isn't just a pipe dream. The Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, which calls for protecting fully half of Canada's forest while promoting sustainable development on the remainder, has attracted support from a remarkable array of traditional adversaries. These include territorial and provincial governments, Canadian Indian tribes, environmental groups like the World Wildlife Fund and the Nature Conservancy, and (most important) industrial giants like Suncor Energy and large paper companies like Domtar and Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries.

One reason for this unusual degree of cooperation and farsightedness is simple self-interest. In the case of the Mackenzie pipeline, cooperation may finally lay to rest legal challenges by tribes that have stalled development for more than 30 years. In other cases, American consumers are helping to drive change. Most of the wood pulp from boreal forests, for example, goes into products like tissue paper, catalogs and half the newsprint sold in the United States; Canadian logging companies are signing on to the conservation framework to avoid growing pressure from environmental groups in this country. Tembec, a \$4 billion forest products enterprise that was an original signatory for the framework, has pledged to bring all 40 million acres of its timberland into compliance with the development standards set by the international Forest Stewardship Council.

Governments have also begun to recognize the economic importance of a vibrant, healthy boreal forest. A recent study found that the ecological benefits of Canada's boreal forest — including clean water, carbon sequestration and pest control by migratory birds — are worth more than \$80 billion annually, two and a half times the extractive value of its resources.

But there is much the Canadian government can still do to protect this incomparable region, in addition to supporting the goals of the boreal framework. It has yet to address the heavy environmental impacts of tar-sand extraction, which range from the strip-mining of immense areas to the use of staggering quantities of fresh water. In the Northwest Territories, one of the most pressing needs is to identify (with the help of the aboriginal groups there) and preserve significant swaths of the most critical natural areas in the Mackenzie Valley before the pipeline is routed and built. The time to draw up a workable — and visionary — plan to safeguard the boreal is now.

Most Americans will never visit the boreal forest, never watch woodland caribou flow over the crest of a hill by the hundreds, never hear the howl of gray wolves echo through the conifers. But the boreal touches us every spring, as the birds it scatters to the world come back again. And if we're wise, we can ensure that it will always be so. Sitting on the porch, I realized the warblers had moved on. They were already feeling the boreal's timeless pull, tugging them north again.

Scott Weidensaul is the author, most recently, of "Return to Wild America."