

Opinion

Boreal 'refuges' key to songbird survival as climate changes

Climate change is rapidly modifying Canada's North. There is no time to waste in adopting the solutions in front of us to slow climate change and give birds, other animals and plants and even us humans, the best chance to adapt and survive into the future.



Jeff Wells

Opinion

Billions of birds are right now flying south from Canada's Boreal forest to wintering grounds from the U.S. to South America. While this incredible flow of life

washes across our continent, news continues to spread of how climate change imperils birds and indeed all life on Earth. It can make the most stout-hearted feel hopeless.

But a report released recently by the Boreal Songbird Initiative offers new hope.

Research confirms that large areas of the Boreal forest region will remain relatively stable in the face of climate change. Protecting these areas will ensure birds—and caribou, moose and countless other species—can survive the changes underway.

This is hopeful news not just for wildlife, but for Canada as well. Canada pledged to protect at least 17 per cent of lands by 2020 as part of its commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity, part of the global effort to combat mounting species declines and extinctions. To achieve this goal, the federal government stepped up earlier this year with a \$1.3-billion investment for nature conservation. New assessments of where birds and other animals will continue to thrive can help guide Canada as it accelerates toward this international conservation goal.

The report, "Boreal Forest Refuge: Conserving North America's Bird Nursery in the Face of Climate Change," used climate change scenarios to map where birds will be in coming decades. The bad news is that at least half of the Boreal forest birds are projected to have ranges shrink significantly over the next century. And all will be forced to shift where they nest to stay within the climate conditions they need.

The large, fairly stable areas of Bo-

real forest, identified as "climate refugia," will help many species withstand these changes. The research also identified "climate corridors" of healthy forest that can help some bird species adapt when ranges shift northward.

Another piece of good news is that large portions of the climate refugia and climate corridors in the Boreal forest region remain largely ecologically intact today. That means that the opportunity still exists to plan ahead and establish protections for the large landscapes required for ensuring the survival of the billions of birds that call the Boreal forest their home.

Protecting these same large intact landscapes also offers the last, best chance to prevent the extinction of Canada's woodland caribou and stem declines in other at-risk species. These same landscapes hold massive stores of carbon, some of the largest in the world. Left intact, they will continue to pull carbon from the atmosphere and tuck it safely away for years to come.

There is no doubt that combatting climate change still requires drastically lowering the amount of industrial greenhouse gas emissions being injected daily into our atmosphere. But protecting the intact forests and wetlands of the boreal forest is also vital in our battle against climate change.

Indigenous governments across the Boreal forest are taking the lead in creating protected areas and land use plans that balance conservation and development and help sustain birds and other wildlife. Provincial, territorial, and federal govern-



A Cape May Warbler. These birds have been steadily flying North. Photograph courtesy Jeff Nadler

ments have a unique opportunity to partner with Indigenous governments, recognize these Indigenous protected areas, and take further action to preserve biodiversity and respond to climate change.

Climate change is rapidly modifying Canada's North. There is no time to waste in adopting the solutions in front of us to slow climate change and give birds, other animals and plants and even us humans, the best chance to adapt and survive into the future.

Dr. Jeff Wells is the science and policy director at the Boreal Songbird Initiative. *The Hill Times*

The future is on board

40 YEARS

VIA Rail Canada

More than ever, VIA Rail wants to connect Canadians to a sustainable future.

Maximize your productivity

With Wi-Fi, power outlets, use of your cellphone and comfy seats—you just might like the train more than the office.

Reduce your carbon footprint

Making the smart choice today helps contribute to a greener tomorrow.

Smarter value for taxpayers

It's good for your bottom line and Canada's, too.

Connect communities

VIA Rail connects 4 million travellers and 400 communities across Canada.