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On Eve of Bird Treaty Anniversary, High Tech Rewrites Story of Bird Migration

Innovations in technology reveal that many migratory birds fly farther and faster and take more varied routes than previously thought. These findings reshape the conventional understanding of bird flyways—the notion that most birds migrate along four predictable corridors. According to a new report, they also reinforce the fact that billions of birds start their migration in North America’s boreal forest. And they show that migratory birds depend on much bigger swaths of healthy landscape than experts realized.

Scientists tracked a Blackpoll Warbler—tiny enough to fit into a teacup—flying nonstop from Canada’s boreal region to the Caribbean. And they followed a Whimbrel moving from its breeding grounds in the Mackenzie River Delta on to Hudson Bay and Cape Breton Island before making a nonstop flight to Brazil, covering more ground in the boreal forest than previously documented.

“Birds go farther and faster and have broader migratory routes than we thought. This new evidence shifts our understanding of what migratory birds need. They need landscapes to remain wild on a much larger scale,” said Dr. Jeff Wells of the Boreal Songbird Initiative. “That opportunity still exists in North America’s boreal forest—the nesting ground for billions of migratory birds.”

These discoveries, outlined in the report *Charting a Healthy Future for North America’s Birds*, emerge as Canada and the United States celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Convention this August. The treaty helped numerous bird species rebound from near extinction, but now many species are in steep decline and face grave new threats, ranging from climate change to habitat loss.

In June, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, U.S. President Barack Obama, and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto renewed their nations’ commitment to protecting migratory bird habitat and called for developing a vision for the next 100 years of bird conservation.

The report, released by the Boreal Songbird Initiative, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ducks Unlimited, and Environment for the Americas, offers a 21st century approach to sustaining migratory birds. It calls for protecting at least half of the boreal forest and honouring the rights of Indigenous people—often the frontline stewards of bird ranges within the boreal forest—to conserve their traditional lands.

“It’s been a hundred years since we signed the pioneering Migratory Bird Convention. It’s time for another breakthrough. Setting bolder targets for land protection—like protecting at least 50 percent of the boreal forest and applying world-leading standards to any development in remaining areas—is our century’s great conservation idea,” said Les Bogdan of Ducks Unlimited Canada.

The findings in the report strengthen the scientific consensus around large-scale conservation:

- Satellite tracking and geolocator technologies are providing detailed accounts of when and where birds move, revealing critical areas of migratory habitat for potential protection.

- Radar and audio sorting technologies paint new pictures of nocturnal migration, including discovery of previously unknown rest stops that songbirds rely on during migration.
- And citizen scientists uploading observations via mobile phones have helped chart the full migration cycle for 118 species, demonstrating many species' reliance on the Boreal Forest.

“These technologies confirm that protecting the boreal forest will deliver continental-scale benefits for billions of birds and the ecosystems they support across North America,” said Dr. John Fitzpatrick of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

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The full report and additional media resources can be found at:

<http://www.borealbirds.org/announcements/charting-healthy-future-birds>

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ABOUT THE BOREAL SONGBIRD INITIATIVE

The Boreal Songbird Initiative (BSI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to outreach and education about the importance of the boreal forest region to North America's birds, other wildlife, and the global environment.

ABOUT THE CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is a world leader in the study and conservation of birds, and an educational hub for the biodiversity sciences. Its hallmarks are scientific excellence and technological innovation, advancing the understanding of nature, and engaging people of all ages to learn about birds and protect the planet. Founded in 1915, the Cornell Lab is a nonprofit unit of Cornell University supported by 100,000 members and friends.

ABOUT DUCKS UNLIMITED INC.

Ducks Unlimited Inc. (DU) is the world's largest non-profit organization dedicated to conserving North America's continually disappearing waterfowl habitats. Established in 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 13 million acres thanks to contributions from more than a million supporters across the continent. Guided by science and dedicated to program efficiency, DU works toward the vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever.

ABOUT DUCKS UNLIMITED CANADA

Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) is the leader in wetland conservation. A registered charity, DUC partners with government, industry, non-profit organizations and landowners to conserve wetlands that are critical to waterfowl, wildlife and the environment.

ABOUT ENVIRONMENT FOR THE AMERICAS

Environment for the Americas (EFTA) is a non-profit organization that houses the organizing efforts around International Migratory Bird Day and other projects and programs dedicated to increasing bird conservation education. EFTA works with partners and programs throughout the Western Hemisphere.