

## NONGAME BIRD CONSERVATION PROGRAMS IN MINNESOTA

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Abstract. -- Since its origin in 1977, the nongame program in the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has dealt with nongame vertebrate ecology and conservation in prairies, wetlands, forests, and urban areas. Primary activities have included data collection and research on sandhill cranes, colonial nesting waterbirds, bald eagles, and other species.

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The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources initiated its present nongame wildlife program in February of 1977 with my appointment as nongame supervisor. Funding for this position is derived from the state game and fish fund, and staff assistance is derived from one Young Adult Conservation Corps member. This is a modest beginning, but the initial results of the program have yielded a substantial amount of data on nongame species. Some of this information has already been used to plan and implement research and habitat management activities.

The nongame program is concerned with vertebrate ecology and conservation in four primary habitats: prairies, wetlands, urban areas, and forest lands. This morning I will only address those aspects of the program which concern forest zone bird life.

### PRIORITY SPECIES

The State of Minnesota has been divided into ten faunal regions, and a list of priority species has been compiled for each region. These lists were developed in consultation with authorities from throughout the state.

### DATA COLLECTION

Four sources of data are being used to obtain information on the distribution and relative abundance of the priority species:

1. Keysort observation cards were distributed to selected state, federal, university persons and private

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individuals to report sightings of eastern greater sandhill cranes. A total of 280 reports of cranes have been received in two years.

2. Five-by-seven cards with lists of priority species were prepared for each faunal region and distributed to state and federal wildlife personnel and to interested private citizens on request. An observation card note pad was distributed with each card. About 1200 verified reports of uncommon species ranging from great gray owls to whooping cranes have been submitted to the DNR in two years. The emphasis of this program is to collect data on resident breeding species. This information has been logged in a nongame data bank which will be computerized in the near future.
3. Individual contacts, observation cards, and literature reviews were used to collect information on colonial waterbird nest sites. In 1978, people contributed data on 214 nesting sites used by 16 colonial waterbird species.
4. The Department of Natural Resources assisted Mr. Robert Janssen of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union in finding volunteers to carry out 47 of the state's 52 federal breeding bird survey routes in 1978.

### RESEARCH

In 1978, the Department of Natural Resources initiated a research project funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine if migrant bald eagles are getting secondary lead poisoning from feeding on crippled Canada geese which are carrying lead shot. Four bald

eagles were captured, X-rayed, blood samples were taken, and the birds marked prior to release. The study is being conducted in cooperation with the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, the Raptor Rehabilitation Clinic at the University of Minnesota School of Veterinary Medicine, and the Department of Entomology, Fisheries, and Wildlife at the University of Minnesota.

Dead raptors, wading birds and white pelicans encountered by state personnel are being collected and referred to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service for pesticide analysis whenever the situation dictates. Sixty-eight great blue herons, great egrets, hawks, and white pelicans have been checked in the past year. Dead birds not needed for pesticide analysis are referred to appropriate agencies for scientific and educational purposes.

Beginning in the spring of 1979, an observation card program will be initiated for reporting sightings of common loon nests and pairs with young. This two-year program is designed to assess the current status, abundance and distribution of breeding loons in Minnesota.

#### MANAGEMENT

Land ownership patterns are being determined for great blue heron colonies and bald eagle nesting sites in northern Minnesota which are not within the boundaries of the national forests. Formalized plans will be developed in cooperation with the State Division of Forestry to manage the sites on state forest lands. Where these nesting locations occur on county-owned or private lands, the DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will consult with the owners about site preservation.

Two great blue heron colonies on private lands are being evaluated to determine if land acquisition is advisable. The largest heronry in Minnesota, located on Pelican Lake in Grant County, was purchased by The Nature Conservancy in 1978. In some years it has contained up to 10,000 nests.

Hearding Island is a dredge spoil island in the Duluth harbor which formerly supported a colony of common terns and piping plovers. Plant succession has now eliminated these birds from the island. A plan has been implemented to designate the island as a Wildlife Management Area, and strip vegetation from about 5 to 10 acres of land to recreate the successional stage most favorable to these uncommon species.

#### SUMMARY

The projects just mentioned represent only the beginning of a comprehensive state nongame wildlife conservation program. The future of the program hinges on the passage of a federal nongame conservation bill in the new session of Congress and of a similar bill in the Minnesota legislature.

Reports on our 1978 sandhill crane observation program, state heronry inventory, uncommon wildlife observation system, and on the DNR nongame program are available free on request at the following address: Nongame Supervisor, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Box 7, Centennial Building, 658 Cedar Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55155.