

Southeast United States Waterbird Conservation Plan

Summary Publication

Full plan available for download at
www.waterbirdconservation.org

The vision for the plan is to provide regional guidance and perspective to partners, landowners, and land managers for accomplishing waterbird conservation objectives. This plan provides a link between the national plan and local conservation initiatives. It outlines a framework through which partners can identify and develop projects that build upon existing information to move waterbird conservation forward at both the regional and continental scale.

This plan, the Southeastern Regional Waterbird Conservation Plan, seeks to elaborate on the goals and objectives established in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan. Within the context of the continental plan, stepped down goals and objectives are described for the regional landscape. In the regional plan, priority species are identified, major threats to waterbirds are described, and conservation actions are outlined.



The Southeastern Region of the United States encompasses a wide range of habitat types from lowland coastal wetlands to high elevation forests. Many of these habitats are critically important to waterbirds during some portion of their annual cycle. From the expansive coastal wetlands of Louisiana to the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic salt marshes and the barrier islands of Georgia and the Carolinas; from freshwater wetlands in peninsular Florida to the pocosins and great swamps of the central Atlantic States; from the pelagic areas in the Atlantic to the semi-arid prairies of Texas, this Region is nothing if not diverse.

Waterbird conservation has a unique history in the Southeastern Region, dating back to the early 1900s when plume hunting nearly destroyed the massive multi-species waterbird colonies. Great strides have been taken in this region to protect and manage habitat to support the return of large assemblages of waterbirds. From the Everglades Restoration project to the development of multiple Joint Ventures, the Southeast Region is moving forward to meet the goals outlined in national plans, bird conservation initiatives, and joint venture implementation plans.



Common tern, Walker Golder

Overarching conservation goals for the region include:

- Recovery of declining and otherwise vulnerable high priority species and subspecies (especially listed taxa) to healthy population levels region-wide.
- Maintenance of healthy populations of other species.
- Restoration and protection of critical habitats.
- Develop and implement science-based approaches to resolving issues related to human interactions with waterbirds including: depredation, fishing gear entanglement, and collision with structures.



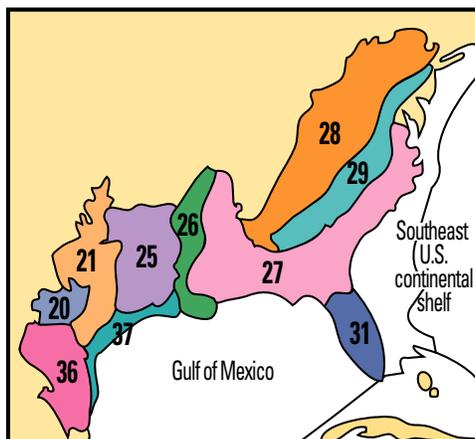
Magnificent frigate bird, E. Kirdler

Scope

The Southeastern Region extends from eastern Texas and Oklahoma, through the Florida peninsula, and northward into eastern North Carolina and Virginia. It extends into the Gulf of Mexico and pelagic areas off both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Included in this region are 10 Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs), 2 pelagic BCRs, 4 Joint Ventures, more than 150 National Wildlife Refuges, and all or part of 21 states.

BCRs included in the plan

- 20 – Edwards Plateau
- 21 – Oaks and Prairies
- 25 – West Gulf Coastal Plain/Ouachitas
- 26 – Mississippi Alluvial Valley
- 27 – Southeastern Coastal Plain
- 28 – Appalachian Mountains
- 29 – Piedmont
- 31 – Peninsular Florida
- 36 – Tamaulipan Brushlands
- 37 – Gulf Coastal Prairie



Major Threats

Habitat loss and degradation represents the largest threat to waterbird conservation in the Southeast Region. Wetland loss in the southeastern United States represented 89% of the wetlands lost in the entire country through the mid-1980s (Hefner et al. 1994). A large portion of the human population in the region resides within 50 miles of the coast, impacting coastal wetlands and nesting beaches through development, disturbance, and degradation of habitat.

For all waterbird groups, habitat conservation plays a key role in preserving and increasing populations. Enhancing or restoring lost habitat and protecting existing habitat from human disturbances or predators are the highest priorities for waterbird conservation in the southeastern United States. While the major threats to some groups of waterbirds are well known, others are not. The lack of information regarding the impact of commercial fishing activities on pelagic seabirds is a very good example. Areas where threats are not known are identified as priority research needs.



Snowy egret, Ryan Hagerty

Cover photo: reddish egret, James Leupold



Sandhill cranes, Walker Golder

Recommended Conservation Priorities

The following is a list of the highest priority waterbird conservation actions for the Region. This list is neither completely comprehensive nor in order of significance. Instead, this list outlines some of the main issues that should be addressed in Regional conservation planning. These activities are critical to increasing populations of waterbird species to meet the population objectives for the Region. Species-specific population objectives and priority activities are further outlined in the main text of the Plan.

- Protect populations and habitat in areas essential for conservation of high priority brush and tree nesting species (i.e. the Everglades, Florida Bay, Texas and Louisiana coastal marshes).
- Contribute to meeting population goals for waterbirds, with emphasis regionally on Great White Heron, Wood Stork, and Reddish Egret, and locally for Roseate Spoonbill (Florida Bay and Everglades), Brown Pelican (Florida Bay and Florida Keys), and White Ibis (Everglades).
- Resolve taxonomic status of Great White Heron.
- Relocate or otherwise determine fate of over 10,000 Brown Pelican pairs no longer breeding at Breton National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana.
- Increase research and monitoring attention for priority species.
- Protect and restore nesting beaches for beach nesting waterbirds.
- Contribute to meeting population goals for Least Tern, Roseate Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Black Skimmer, and Common Tern.
- Relocate or otherwise determine fate of over 35,000 Sandwich Tern pairs no longer breeding at Breton National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana.
- Increase availability of high quality artificial nesting habitat such as spoil islands, barges, and other protected structures.
- Protect and manage marsh, wet prairie, savanna, and grassland habitat for marshbirds.
- Contribute to meeting population goals for Whooping Crane, Mississippi Sandhill Crane, King Rail, Black Rail, Yellow Rail, Limpkin, Purple Gallinule, Least Bittern, and breeding populations of Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot.
- Restore Okefenokee Swamp habitat for Florida Sandhill Cranes.
- Significantly increase acreage of emergent wetlands in the region (preliminary recommendations for 100,000 acres from Mississippi Valley westward and for another 100,000 acres east of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley).
- Resolve factors that may be causing high mortality for open water and pelagic species.
- Determine the role of bird bycatch with fishing gear and oceanic pollution in prohibiting achievement of population goals for species including

Red-throated Loon, Common Loon, Northern Gannet, Horned Grebe, Black-capped Petrel, Bermuda Petrel, and Audubon's Shearwater.

- Establish that foraging Black-capped Petrels foraging off Cape Hatteras are from the Haitian breeding population and determine relative importance of likely mortality from human exploitation in Hispaniola compared to exploitation of resources along the Outer Continental Shelf off the Atlantic Coast in the Southeast United States.
- Continue research to understand the link between non-breeding American Coot mortality and water quality in certain reservoirs.
- Increase populations for additional regionally important species such as Little Blue Heron, Magnificent Frigatebird, and Interior Least Tern.



Roseate spoonbill, Ryan Hagerty

- Evaluate effects of depredation control on maintaining stable breeding populations of Little Blue Herons, wintering populations of American White Pelican, and breeding Double-crested Cormorants in the West Gulf Coastal Plain and Mississippi Alluvial Plain, as well as the East Gulf Coastal Plain region of Southeastern Coastal Plain.
- Develop and implement standardized region wide monitoring protocols for all waterbird groups and integrate into a centralized database.
- Increase outreach and education opportunities region wide.



King rail, Jim Rathert/MO Conservation

Southeast Priority Waterbird Species

The plan includes all wetland dependent bird species not covered in the United States Shorebird Conservation Plan (Brown et. al 2001) or the North American Waterfowl Conservation Plan (USFWS 2004).

The status of the all 82 waterbird species occurring in the region are identified and discussed. Fourteen species have been identified as regional priority species in need of **Critical Recovery or Immediate Management**. Nine of these species are of continental concern. An additional 36 species were identified as high regional priorities needing **Management Attention or Planning and Responsibility**, of these, 17 are of continental concern. Major threats faced by these species are mortality of waterbirds associated with various fisheries and aquaculture, loss and deterioration of habitat, disturbance of nesting areas (especially beaches), and effects from contaminants.

Critical Recovery

- Bermuda Petrel
- Magnificent Frigatebird
- “Great White” Heron
- Wood Stork
- Greater Flamingo
- Whooping Crane
- Sandhill Crane

Immediate Management

- Red-throated Loon
- Audubon’s Shearwater
- Common Tern
- Reddish Egret
- Little Blue Heron
- Black Rail
- King Rail

Additional information provided with the Plan

Included with the plan are several Appendices with additional useful information. Appendix 1 provides detailed information on Recommendations for Monitoring Long-Legged Wading Birds, Great White Heron Taxonomy, Wetland Losses by BCR, Contaminants, Beneficial Use of Dredged Material, and Depredation Control Issues. Appendix 2 contains table with all of the scores used to prioritize waterbirds into conservation categories. In addition, Part II of the plan will be added very soon and will include species accounts for all waterbird species.



Brown pelican, Gary Stolz

Acknowledgments

This plan represents the culmination of the efforts of many, many individuals representing a wide variety of organizations. The list is far too long to include here, however, this document in and of itself is a testament to their commitment and dedication to the conservation of waterbirds in the Southeastern United States.

The authors would like to acknowledge everyone who provided data, comments, input into earlier drafts of the plan, or simply moral support. Without the efforts of every single person associated with the project from conception to completion, this document would not be as comprehensive or accurate. It has been a monumental effort and to everyone who contributed in so many ways, we sincerely thank you!



Little blue heron, Walker Golder

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Sandwich tern, Donna Dewhurst

