

American airways

In 2013, the British Birdwatching Fair will be supporting the BirdLife Flyways Programme for the third and final year, with the focus on the Southern Cone Grasslands

In 2013, the British Birdwatching Fair will provide support for the third year in succession for BirdLife's Global Flyways Programme. Birdfair celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2013 and the focus of this special year will be on the Americas particularly on long-distance migrant birds that depend on grasslands. The project will support the work of four BirdLife Partners in the Southern Cone grasslands (Pampas) of South America.

Many grassland-dependent species in the Americas are in trouble. Prairie birds have shown the most sustained population declines of any bird group in North America, and since the 1970s the populations of Canadian breeding grassland birds have on average declined by almost 40%. Historical population declines are likely to have been larger, as much native grassland habitat was lost prior to the start of bird monitoring in 1970. The situation is, if anything, worse in South America: Argentina alone has around 25 globally threatened or Near Threatened grassland-dependent species, including several wintering migrants from the North.

Reversing the decline in migratory grassland species will require coordinated work throughout the "flyway"—the entire area used by these birds over the course of the year, including breeding and wintering grounds, migration corridors and stopover sites—known as "full lifecycle conservation." BirdLife, with a network of Partners spanning the Americas, is ideally placed both to carry out the work on the ground, and to coordinate activities along the flyway, from the prairies of Canada and the USA, via the arid grasslands of Mexico, the savannas of Venezuela and Colombia (the Llanos) and Bolivia (the Beni Savannas), to the Pampas and beyond.

Funding from this year's Birdfair will lay the foundations for BirdLife to develop a coordinated approach to grassland bird conservation

Upland Sandpiper depends on the effective management of grasslands along its migratory route (Jonath; flickr.com)

throughout the hemisphere, with a focus on establishing and documenting bird-friendly management regimes at key sites in Latin America. Sites and Partners linked by the movements of flagship species between North and Latin America will share resources, expertise and experience.

A suite of long-distance migrants, including Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda*, Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*, Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*, and Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, depends on the effective management of grasslands throughout the Americas flyway. Buff-breasted Sandpiper, for example, breeds along the Arctic coasts of North America, migrates southwards via Bolivia's Beni Savannas, winters in the grasslands of Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina, and returns to its breeding grounds via the Colombian Llanos. Swainson's Hawk has the second longest migration of all raptor species, with some populations travelling over 10,000 km from the northern USA and Canada to their wintering grounds in the Pampas. The full round-trip route used by the Bobolink has still not been fully established, but individuals fitted with geolocators have been found to use the Llanos on both legs of their migration, which takes some if not all populations as far as the Beni Savannas and the Pampas.

In the USA, data collected by BirdLife Partner the National Audubon Society have found that Bobolink declined by 51% in the 40 years between 1966 and 2007. Loss of breeding and wintering habitat is implicated in the decline, but other factors may also operate during the time the birds spend in transit. The huge, traditional roosts of Dickcissels *Spiza americana* in the Venezuelan part of the Llanos are sprayed with pesticides by rice growers, and Bobolinks, which use similar roosts, and are also regarded as a pest by rice growers (the



ABOVE Swainson's Hawk spends to winter on the pampas (uberoogle2006; flickr.com)



LEFT Resident species like Chestnut-capped Blackbird *Chrysomus ruficapillus* also depend on the continent's grasslands (San Javier)

specific name *oryzivorus* means "rice-eater") may also be targeted.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper was severely over-hunted in the 1900s, and a population that probably once numbered millions is now counted in tens of thousands. Habitat loss on its breeding and wintering grounds, and toxic agriculture chemicals, are the most likely factors behind its failure to recover. The population of Swainson's Hawk has been stable for the last 40 years, but it has been extirpated from much of its former range, primarily as a result of habitat loss but also through the use of pesticides. With full protection from hunting in North America, the Upland Sandpiper has shown a small increase over 40 years, but again is likely to have reached only a fraction of its former range and population.

This year's Birdfair-funded project will coordinate work at grassland Important Bird Areas used by these four "flagship" species during their migratory journeys in four countries: Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia and Argentina. "Once we bring in the work already being done in the USA and Canada, and in the Southern Cone, we will be moving towards covering the full life-cycle of these grassland migrants", explains Rob Clay, Senior Conservation Manager for BirdLife in the Americas. He adds that the work will benefit not only other grassland-dependent long-distance

migrants that use these sites, but short-distance migrants and resident species too.

The remnants of native grasslands throughout the Americas are fast disappearing under grain, oil-seed and other commodity crops. Of the prairie grassland which once covered 3.5 million km² from Canada to southern Texas and Mexico, little remains in a natural state. Just 4% of tallgrass prairie survives in the USA, in fragments which largely depend on the actions and advocacy of conservationists and the goodwill of livestock farmers.

Many grassland birds are able to adapt to a level of disturbance, as long as the altered habitat supports their breeding and feeding requirements, but the more sustainable kinds of grazing and agriculture are rapidly being replaced by large-scale agribusiness, exacerbated by the switch to crop-based biofuels.

Fortunately, many grassland species can co-exist and thrive with bird-friendly agricultural practices. Some actually require large herbivores, for which cattle herds provide a reasonable substitute, to maintain their ideal habitat.

Traditional ranching in the Prairies and the Pampas, in which cattle are left out to graze on natural grasses, has lost much of its market to "feedlot beef", which involves feeding confined cattle on soy and grain (much of it grown on the former

pasturelands). In 2006, four BirdLife Partners, Aves Argentinas, Aves Uruguay, SAVE Brazil and Guyra Paraguay with funding from Jensen, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Forest Service – International Programs, Canadian Wildlife Service, formed the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance (Alianza de Pastizal del Conosur) to provide incentives for local ranchers to maintain or revive traditional extensive grazing. A cornerstone of the Alliance's approach has been the development of a "bird-friendly" natural grasslands beef certification scheme. The current market for such certified meat, which commands much higher prices than feedlot beef, is primarily in the USA and Europe, but there is growing regional demand.

The Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance drew on the experience of the "Joint Ventures" between conservationists, ranchers and government in North America. Now the model is being re-exported from South to North America. In the USA, BirdLife Partner the National Audubon Society is partnering with the ranchers who own the remaining natural grasslands to develop market-based management that benefits prairie birds. "Our approach to advancing grassland-bird-friendly beef production through more effective partnerships with ranchers mirrors the efforts of



Dickcissel: the lives of the grassland birds and that of the gaucho are inextricably linked

LEFT (Ramendan; flickr.com) RIGHT (Anibal Parera)

BirdLife Partners in the Southern Cone Grasslands”, says Justin Pepper, conservation director of Audubon’s Prairie Bird Initiative.

Other BirdLife Americas Partners in countries with extensive grasslands and a declining traditional “cowboy culture” will build on these experiences to create a broad conservation constituency among grassland farmers, the businesses that process, distribute and sell their products, and the people of the communities whose livelihoods depend on the grasslands, and whose lives are enriched by the birds and other grassland biodiversity.

“In Argentina we’ll focus on actions at San Javier, a key wintering area for Bobolinks, and one of four sites that have been the focus of a World Bank-GEF-funded project [Grassland and Savannas of the Southern Cone of South America: Initiatives for their conservation in Argentina] led by Aves Argentinas and Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina to develop a ‘proof of concept’ of the Southern Cone Alliance’s certification scheme”, Rob Clay explains. “In Colombia we’re looking to work in the Llanos in Casanare department with an NGO called Calidris, who have just applied to become the BirdLife Affiliate. They’re going to work at one or more of four sites which have not currently been identified as IBAs, but are

believed likely to qualify for Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Bobolink. In Mexico we’re looking to focus on an area important for Swainson’s Hawk”.

The site in Bolivia has already been chosen. In 2008, BirdLife Partner Armonía, together with the Loro Parque Foundation and World Land Trust, established the 3,500 ha Barba Azul reserve, within the Beni Savannas. “The reserve was created due to its importance for the Critically Endangered Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis*, but fieldwork has since revealed that it is also a critical stopover area for the Buff-breasted Sandpiper after it crosses the Amazonian rainforest”, says Rob Clay. “Although the reserve has not currently been designated as an IBA, it clearly qualifies as one, both for the macaw and the sandpiper.”

Birdfair support will be used to trial bird-friendly adaptive grassland management regimes at the four sites, supported by biological monitoring, with the goal of developing a “recipe book” of grassland management techniques and incentives for grassland conservation that ensure the ecological, economic and social sustainability of natural grasslands throughout the Americas. These pilot sites will be used to demonstrate and communicate management and conservation techniques more widely within grassland communities and policy

environments in the project countries. Activities will include exchanges of experiences between producers, and documentation of case studies through videos.

The BirdLife Americas Partnership will build links between grassland IBAs in Latin America and those in North America, documenting connections between sites through shared migrants and shared management approaches. Other Latin American BirdLife Partners will become involved. As the scientific foundation for hemispheric grassland bird conservation develops, the project will work with National Audubon and with BirdLife’s Canadian co-Partners, Nature Canada and Bird Studies Canada, to build a BirdLife Americas grassland initiative,

and secure long-term support for grasslands conservation throughout the hemisphere.

Birdfair support will also be used to catalyse a major fundraising drive for grassland bird conservation in the Americas, supported by the BirdLife Secretariat and BirdLife Partners.

“There is a clear need for hemispheric cooperation on grassland bird conservation, and BirdLife, as a hemisphere-wide network of Partners, is ideally placed to make a difference, both locally and across the hemisphere”, said Birdfair co-founder and co-organiser Martin Davies of the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK). “Birdfair support for the conservation of grassland migrants on their wintering grounds in Latin America will enable BirdLife to take the first steps in the development of a coordinated approach to grassland bird conservation throughout the hemisphere, catalysing on-the-ground management, restoration and protection, sharing experiences and building capacity, raising awareness about the need for grassland conservation, and generating new funding opportunities.”



by Nick Langley

For more information visit www.alianzadelpastizal.org

The Birdfair is jointly organised and promoted by the RSPB and the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. It is a three-day event held in the UK in August each year. In 2012 it attracted some 330 exhibitors from many countries and more than 21,300 visitors. It has supported BirdLife projects around the world for almost a quarter of a century, raising more than £3 million (US\$4.6 million). It has also dramatically raised the profile of many key BirdLife conservation initiatives, from albatrosses in the Southern oceans to rainforests in SE Asia and South America and steppe grasslands in Spain to wetlands in Madagascar.

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