Forest Stewards Guild

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Forestry for Birds, A National Assessment

Preliminary

Forestry for Birds – A National Assessment

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This is a preliminary report produced by the Forest Stewards Guild in 2026. Additional funding will allow us to expand this report and create a national synthesis of these programs; increasing their impact, connectivity, and expansion into new regions.

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Forest Stewards Guild Mission

The Forest Stewards Guild is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to practice and promote stewardship to forge a healthy future for people and forest. For more about the Forest Stewards Guild, visit foreststewardsguild.org.

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Background

North America has lost nearly 3 billion, or roughly one in four, birds over the past 50 years (Rosenberg et al., 2019). The 2025 State of the Birds report by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), shows the U.S. continues to lose birds. This includes a wide range of bird species, both rare and once common species, across different habitats and regions. This trend extends beyond birds and has ramifications for ecosystem integrity, function, and resilience. Within those ecosystems are birds, but also insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, plants and fungi, which may all be stressed and imperiled for many of the same reasons affecting bird populations. Serving as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, the decline in bird abundance is indicative of wide-spread environmental problems.

These declines are not seen in all bird species. Some species are increasing, others are stable, but over one quarter of the species are declining. Many of them are steeply declining and these declines are happening in short-distance migrant and resident species in addition to long-distance neotropicals highlighting that this is not solely a wintering ground habitat issue.

There are many factors leading to these declines and in most cases, it is likely a combination of factors. These factors include habitat loss on breeding grounds and wintering grounds, land cover fragmentation, changing forest demographics, invasive species, climate change, declining insect populations, West Nile virus, powerlines, cell towers, glass buildings, light pollution, and predation by house cats.

Forestry for Birds programs do not address all these threats; they focus on enhancing forest habitat on the breeding grounds by providing land managers, landowners, and loggers, with practical, science-based knowledge and strategies that helps increase reproductive success, and the health of individual birds entering migration.



Forestry for Birds Materials and Programs

Long-term monitoring, field research, and informal field observations have shown that deliberate forest management activities planned and implemented to enhance bird habitat, have been effective in boosting the quality of the habitat and, in turn, increasing the breeding success of the birds (and other creatures) that utilize those habitats.

Forestry for Birds programs have been initiated throughout the country to synthesize and share existing research and develop demonstration sites to highlight the forest practices that can benefit breeding birds. These programs serve to connect professional foresters, public land managers, and private landowners with comprehensive data-driven guidance on how to plan and implement forest management activities that will provide an economic boost to the landowner and local forest products industry while creating and enhancing forest bird habitat.



Forest stewardship plans are a bedrock of sound forest stewardship. Forestry for Birds programs encourage landowners to get a forest stewardship plan developed for their property and include a variety of bird habitat enhancement recommendations.

Note: we refer to these programs as Forestry for Birds, but each state and region has used slightly different terminology to describe their programs.

The first state-wide effort to write a Forestry for the Birds guidebook to provide clear and compelling information on enhancing forest management for the benefit of birds was developed by Audubon Vermont and published in 2008. Since then, 22 other states have either published their own, similar guidebooks, or are included in regional publications.

Most of the guidance in these Forestry for the Birds products is based on, and designed to expand or improve, existing best-management practices (BMPs) already in place. BMPs help maintain:

- forest health and productivity,
- soil health (including minimizing soil compaction, rutting, and changes in nutrient cycling),
- habitat quality and connectivity for birds, and also other wildlife (game and non-game),
- plants and fungi abundance and diversity,
- the preservation of and protection of riparian areas such as streams, vernal ponds, and wetlands, and
- intentional and thoughtful infrastructure creation (e.g. logging roads, log landing areas) that seeks to minimize the amount of affected land, while serving forest

management needs now and in the future.

Most often, recommendations made to improve bird habitat also serve to improve habitat for more than just birds. Well-functioning forests benefit the entire ecosystem.

Each of these programs also make a case for forest stewardship plans. The National Woodland Owner Survey indicates that 81% of private landowners identify wildlife as a primary reason for owning forest lands and 62% would like to use forest management to improve wildlife habitat. However, only 21% of these forestland owners have undertaken forest management in the past 20 years. Forestry for Birds programs can help these landowners make a plan that gives them the confidence that their management will create habitat for the wildlife they are concerned about.

Recognizing the value of birds as representatives of, and a part of, ecosystem function and integrity, efforts to enhance bird habitat by providing land managers, landowners, biologists, and foresters with practical, how-to information has been an effective strategy in improving forest management and the quality of the resulting habitat.

Coordinating These Efforts

Forest Stewards Guild staff and members have been involved with the development of nearly all these programs across the country. In nearly every effort, there is an interest in learning what other states have done and how it can be adapted to benefit the new state or regional program. Unfortunately, there is no national coordination or compilation of these efforts. We have done a preliminary review of these programs and are seeking funding to expand this review so existing programs can be more connected and effective, and this model can be readily expanded into new areas.

Preliminary Assessment

Twenty-two states are covered by some form of Forestry for Birds publication (Figure 1). The form of these publications varies widely from detailed publications to generic forest management publications that mention non-game bird habitat. Two other states, Wisconsin and Colorado, are working on developing programs at the time of this writing.

Approximately 28 states have no bird-focused forest management guidelines, or the guidelines are restricted to a small subset of the state's forests. Notably absent are publications for the vast forest areas of the Southern U.S. and, except for Western Oregon, the West, including the Pacific Northwest and Desert Southwest.

Most publications have been made available as both printed hardcopies and as PDFs freely available to those interested. Many webinars, including a 12-part series organized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have also been developed to serve in place of, supplement, or promote existing guidelines and are freely available on different websites. Publications are as small as a few pages to as large as 60 or more pages. Most include specific recommendations for different forest types and/or for specific bird species (from as few as four to as many as 20 different species). In addition to printed or web-based resources, many Forestry for the Birds programs also implement in-person meetings and workshops that

often include a mix of indoor and outdoor field-based education. A few states have developed bird-friendly forestry certification programs to reward and recognize, as well as provide third party accountability and credibility to foresters, or to forest management activities.

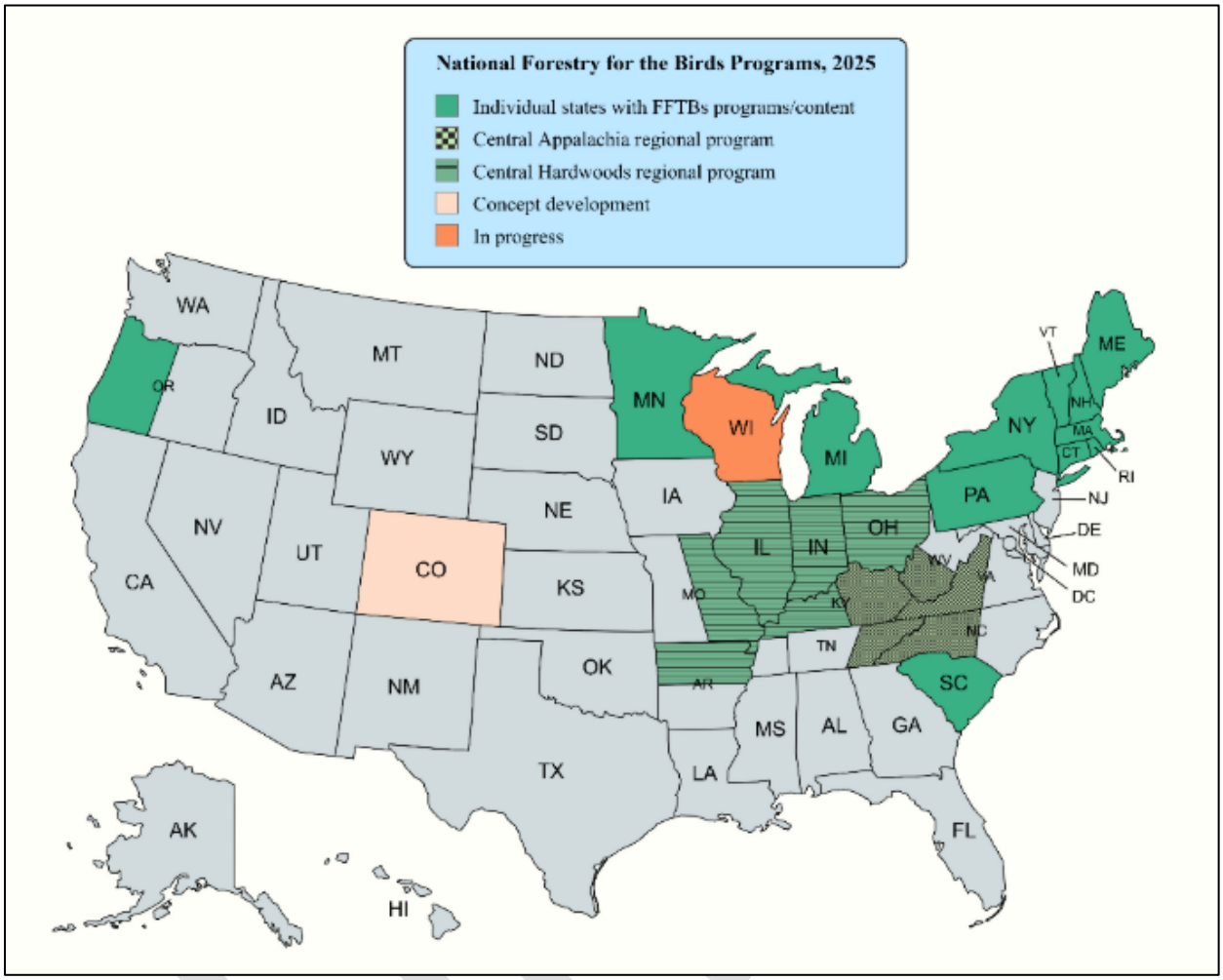


Figure 1. Forestry for Birds programs in the United States.

Next Steps

This initial review highlighted the disconnect between states and the variability in products from region to region. We would like to pursue this further by creating a short summary for each state that identifies strengths and opportunities for improvement. We would include interviews with parties involved and build a network so these programs can build off of one another. This will also help expand this communication tool to new areas and new audiences.

References

Rosenberg, K. V., Dokter, A. M., Blancher, P. J., Sauer, J. R., Smith, A. C., Smith, P. A., Stanton, J. C., Panjabi, A., Helft, L., Parr, M., & Marra, P. P. (2019). Decline of the North American avifauna. Science, 366(6461), 120–124. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw1313

National Woodland Owner Survey: https://research.fs.usda.gov/programs/nwos

2025 State of the Birds report: https://www.stateofthebirds.org/2025/executive-summary/

Links to Forestry for the Birds Programs in Other States or Regions

A Forest Manager's Guide to Forestry for Michigan Birds
A Forest Owner's Guide to Forestry for Michigan Birds
A Woodland Owner's Guide to Forestry for Maine Birds
Bird-Friendly BMP's for Bottomland Forests in the Carolinas
Bird-Friendly Forest Management in Central Appalachian Forests - A Silviculture Guidebook for Foresters
Bird-Friendly Maple Forests
Bird-Friendly Sugarbush Management Guidelines
Birds with Silviculture in Mind - Birder's Dozen Pocket Guide for Vermont Foresters
Forestry for Minnesota Birds
Forestry for Rhode Island Birds - A Guide for Foresters and Landowners to Manage Woodlots "With Birds in Mind"
Forestry for the Birds - Forest Bird Pocket Guide - 18 Priority Species for Pennsylvania Foresters and Landowners
Forestry for the Birds - Pocket Guide for Landowners in Illinois and the Central Hardwoods Region
Forestry for the Birds - Pocket Guide for Landowners in Indiana and the Central Hardwoods Region
Forestry for the Birds - Western Oregon
Logger's Guide to Forestry for Maine Birds
Managing Forests for Birds - A Landowner's Guide
Managing Forests for Trees and Birds in Connecticut - A Guide to Habitat Assessments and Silvicultural Practices
Managing Forests for Trees and Birds in Massachusetts
The Forest Landbird Legacy Program

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