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Testimony of Sean Mahar
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Before the Joint Legislative Hearings on the New York State Budget
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Mr. Chairmen, and other distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to offer the following testimony on Governor Andrew Cuomo's Fiscal Year 2015-2016 Executive Budget proposal. My name is Sean Mahar and I am the Director of Government Relations for Audubon New York, the State program of the National Audubon Society representing 27 local Chapters and 50,000 members across the state. Our mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.

I would like to begin this testimony today by thanking you and your colleagues for a productive 2014 legislative session. In particular, we appreciated your strong efforts to work with the Governor to grow the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), provide new resources through the EPF's Biodiversity Research and Conservation line to promote conservation partnerships with private landowners, continue NY Works investments in upgrading our State Parks, and dedicate new funding to improve access to and hunting opportunities at New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) lands. In addition to these budgetary actions, we also appreciate your leadership in passing the Community Risk Reduction and Resiliency Act, and legislation to reduce light pollution in the state, both of which highlighted New York's leadership role in addressing the threat of climate change.

Audubon New York looks forward to working with you this legislative session to build from this progress, including the continued fight to combat climate change and secure a sustainable energy future. New research by the National Audubon Society has found that if we don't act now, nearly half of North American birds will suffer consequences of climate change, leaving them with an uncertain future. Now, more than ever, we have a responsibility to be the voice of the birds and aggressively combat this urgent threat by protecting the places that birds need to thrive and further reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Adequate investments in natural resource protection is a critical step that will help sustain populations of birds and other wildlife in a changing climate, and improve the quality of life and ecosystem services that benefit all New Yorkers. We believe that where birds thrive, people prosper, and increased conservation funding is central to both the success of Audubon's conservation strategies and the success and sustainability of New York State.

Overall, the Governor's proposed Opportunity Agenda and Budget proposal includes increased investment in essential conservation programs, discussed in greater detail below, and a welcomed focus on promoting climate resiliency and the clean energy economy.

Support funding for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)

All across New York, demand and public support for projects that protect water, improve the quality of our air and public health, and protect the important habitats that are critical for outdoor recreation and tourism are increasing dramatically. In robust and challenging economic conditions, the EPF has proven to be a cornerstone of conservation spending, infusing more than two billion dollars for critical environmental infrastructure improvements into the state economy. Every county has directly benefited from EPF investments which help stimulate the economy and keep New Yorkers working while protecting and restoring natural resources and our communities.

We support the Governor's proposal of \$172 million for the EPF and urge for the final budget to include at least this amount. This \$10 million increase over last year helps the state meet the ever increasing demand for environmental funding. We believe, given the economic condition of the state, that a \$200 million appropriation for the EPF in this year's budget is warranted and supportable. As in the past, we urge that EPF appropriation not come at the expense of other environmental programs. In addition, we support the Governor's proposed increases to the following EPF categories which advance bird conservation: open space protection, invasive species management, Ocean and Great Lakes conservation, the Water Quality Improvements Program, and the Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquaria program which provides important funding for our Audubon Nature Centers.

Create New Incentives for Conservation on Private Lands

The majority of wildlife habitat in New York is privately owned. Actions landowners take have a direct impact on conservation, especially in stewarding our State's forest resources. New incentives are needed to encourage private landowners to undertake sustainable management activities on their land. Such incentives will help improve the health of our forests, grasslands and shrublands, and make them more resilient to climate change and other stressors, while improving habitat for birds and other wildlife and the quality of life for all New Yorkers.

We appreciate the Governor's commitment to hosting a forum on forest conservation and needed property tax incentive reforms, and for authorizing the Biodiversity Research and Stewardship line of the EPF to provide incentive funding for habitat management on private lands. We advocate that more is needed to incentivize landowners to engage in conservation and to leverage similar federal programs. We urge you to work with the Governor to increase the Biodiversity Research and Stewardship program to \$1 million and advance tax credit reforms.

Farmland Protection Initiative in the Southern Tier and Hudson Valley

The Governor's proposed \$50 million farm protection initiative in the Southern Tier and Hudson Valley provides another opportunity to advance the conservation of private lands. While this funding is rightly prioritizing farmland protection through permanent or term conservation easements, we believe this initiative could be enhanced by also authorizing a portion of the funds to be utilized to incentivize private landowners to undertake habitat management on forests, grasslands, and shrublands in the region. Through our work with private landowners in developing habitat management plans, we know that many implement the measures contained in the plans when financial incentives are provided. Therefore, we urge that this initiative include incentives for private landowners to implement habitat management plans on their property. Our on the ground, statewide network uniquely positions us to help the state with implementation of such a program, and welcome the opportunity to provide assistance.

NY Parks 2020

We strongly support the Governor's continued commitment to State Parks with the launch of the NY Parks 2020 initiative, and the proposal of \$110 million for NY Works. This \$20 million increase over last year's commitment is needed to address the backlog of capital projects and we urge for the final budget to include this level of funding. We also urge you to ensure that an increased portion of this funding be dedicated to natural infrastructure projects. Over the last several rounds of NY Works funding, over \$3 million has been

dedicated to habitat improvements and natural resource stewardship projects that have augmented and leveraged our *Audubon in the Parks* initiative and advanced important conservation projects. We urge for at least \$3 million to be dedicated this year to similar stewardship projects.

NY Works – DEC Funding

We also support the Governor's proposed \$8 million for continuing the Access Initiative DEC started last year to improve infrastructure and access to Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and other DEC lands. This funding has supported important acquisitions and improvements that have helped enhance ecotourism opportunities, leverage federal Pittman-Robertson funds, and capitalize on the \$4.2 billion in annual spending by New York's 4 million bird and wildlife watchers. In particular, the funding has promoted access opportunities at numerous state Bird Conservation Areas (BCA) and created new destinations, including the Washington County Grasslands Important Bird Area (IBA) in Fort Edward, NY. We urge the Legislature to ensure this funding is maintained in the final Budget.

Support the Habitat and Access Conservation Account (TED Article VII part AA)

Separate from the DEC's NY Works program investments, the Governor has also proposed to create a new Habitat and Access Conservation Account and commit \$1.5 million annually in revenues from the lifetime hunting and fishing license sales and habitat and access stamp into this new account that will be utilized for habitat conservation and management activities on WMAs and other DEC lands. This will help the state better leverage increased funding from the federal Pittman-Robertson program, and allow the state to hire 18 new staff to guide the implementation of the funds. By advancing on-the-ground conservation work on state lands, this new funding will greatly enhance the habitat and serve as important examples to encourage similar management activities by surrounding private landowners. We are very supportive that the initial program will focus on an early successional/young forest habitat initiative to facilitate timber management and habitat creation on WMAs in key focus areas. We urge you to support the creation of this new account.

State Fair Revitalization

Outside of the traditional conservation funding programs, the Governor has also proposed a \$50 million investment in capital improvements to the State Fairgrounds and surrounding areas, transforming the Fairgrounds into a new-age multi-use facility. With its proximity to Onondaga Lake, an IBA which we are actively working to steward through the Onondaga Lake Conservation Corp, we urge that any improvements benefit the natural resources and birds of this IBA.

Fort Drum Protection

The Governor proposed making strategic investments to purchase over 1,300 acres to enhance training efforts around Fort Drum. Fort Drum is also an IBA, and we are encouraged to see the emphasis on acquiring new buffer lands around this critical military institution. Where possible, we urge that the newly protected lands be managed for the benefit of the priority grassland and early successional forest bird species.

Climate Smart NY and Clean Energy Investments

Building from the important investments identified above, we support the Governor's proposed Climate Smart NY initiative to promote climate change mitigation and resiliency measures to ensure the state is reducing greenhouse gas emissions while taking steps to prepare for an uncertain climate future. Through focusing on implementation of the Community Risk Reduction and Resiliency Act, directing all state agencies to undertake vulnerability assessments to identify climate related risks to agency services and infrastructure, and launching a climate resilient farms program to improve resiliency and advance carbon sequestration on farms, the Governor is positioning the state to continue to lead the nation in addressing climate fueled threats.

Additionally, the Governor's budget proposal contains a number of key investments that will continue to spur New York's clean energy economy. In particular, we urge the legislature to support the Governor's proposals to commit \$5 billion over the next ten years through the Clean Energy Fund to support clean energy projects across the state; launch a \$20 million clean energy business competition in the Southern Tier to develop new

clean energy business ventures; direct NYSERDA to commit \$110 million in Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) funds for Renewable Heat NY, NY Sun and Charge NY; and create a new shared solar initiative to promote greater enrollment in solar programs and exempting solar power produced under power purchase agreements from state and local taxes.

Prioritize Wastewater Infrastructure Investments

The Executive budget proposal did not make a commitment of the settlement fund revenues or other additional funding to address the wastewater infrastructure crisis facing our communities. New York is served by some of the nation's oldest wastewater infrastructure, and the State estimates that \$36.2 billion is needed over the next 20 years to upgrade these facilities and reduce the water quality impairments they cause. It is a missed opportunity for creating jobs and improving local economies by not investing in upgrades to our failing wastewater treatment infrastructure. We strongly urge you to dedicate a portion of the settlement funds or other new funding to wastewater infrastructure improvements and expand funding for the Environmental Facility Corporation's Green Innovation Grants program that incentivizes the use of innovative green infrastructure solutions to managing stormwater.

Federal Ecosystem Restoration Funding - Great Lakes and Long Island Sound

While New York continues to investment in environmental improvements, the federal government must also provide much needed funding. The Omnibus Budget provided funding for the Long Island Sound Restoration and Stewardship Acts, the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. In the coming months, as the President and Congress begin debate on the FY 2016 Federal budget, we look forward to working with you and our Congressional Delegation to communicate the importance of funding these programs.

Conclusion

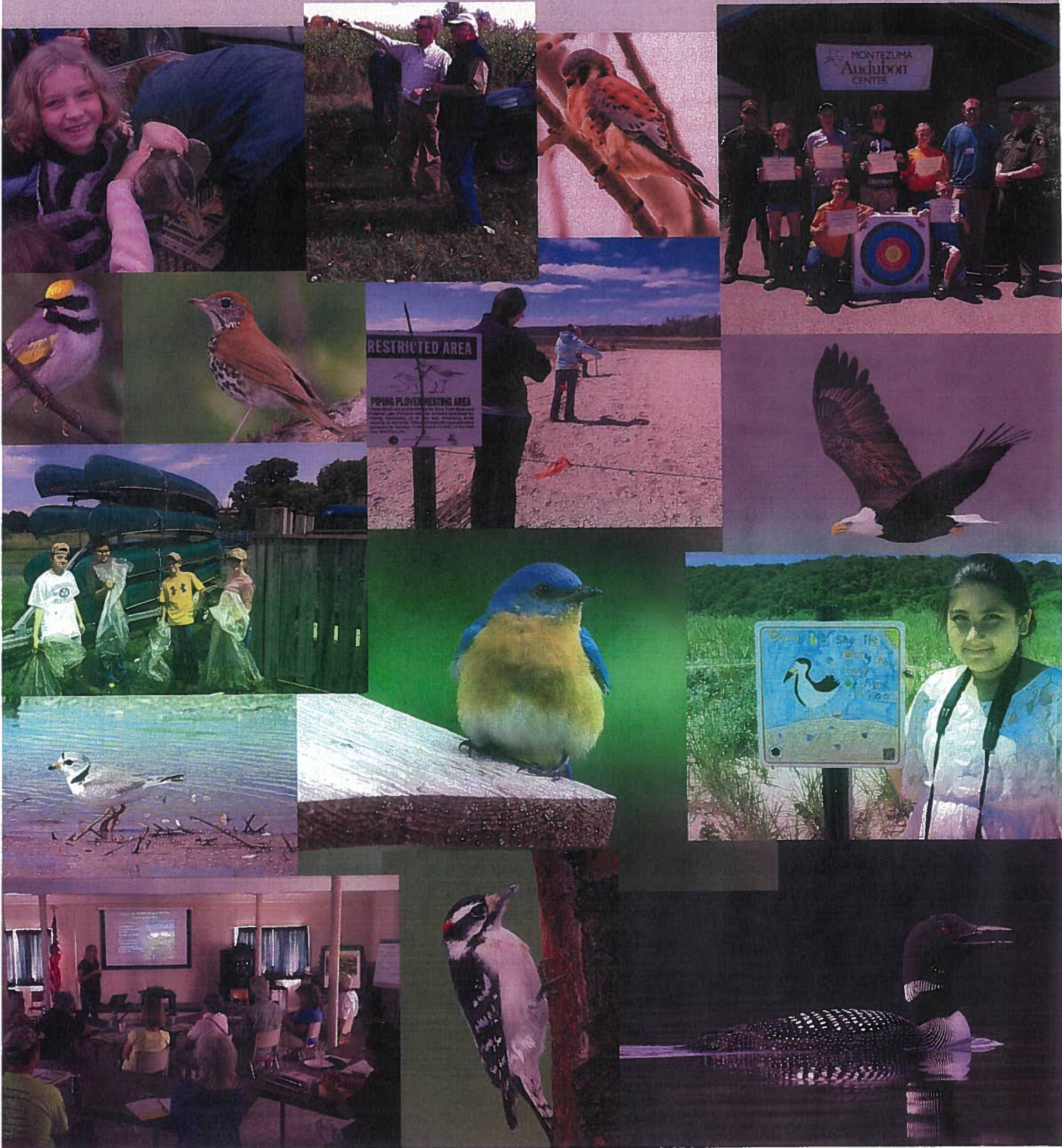
Investments in environmental projects are investments in job creation and improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. We know that the EPF has leveraged \$7 in return for every \$1 invested. We know that for every \$1 billion invested in water infrastructure projects, between 30,000 and 47,500 jobs are created. We look forward to working with you to secure increased funding for environmental protection and natural resource conservation projects throughout our State – it is good for our communities, our economy, and our wildlife.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify before you today, and should you have any questions on the points we have raised above, please contact me at 518-869-9731 or smahar@audubon.org.



Audubon NEW YORK

2015 Legislative Priorities



Conservation Policy Priorities

Audubon New York will maximize our conservation results by advancing critical policies that are needed to protect our most threatened bird species and the habitats they depend on in New York State.



INCREASING CONSERVATION FUNDING

We believe that where birds thrive, people prosper. Increased conservation funding is central to the success of Audubon's work. Investing in natural resource protection helps sustain birds and other wildlife and improves the quality of life and ecosystem services that benefit all New Yorkers. Investments in environmental protection and natural resource conservation play an important role in the State and national economies.



PUTTING WORKING LANDS TO WORK FOR BIRDS & PEOPLE

New York State possesses a rich diversity of forest, grassland and shrubland habitats that support a diversity of bird species. The majority of these habitats are in private ownership and many of the birds that depend on these habitats are rapidly declining. Fueling this sharp decline in bird populations is habitat loss, fragmentation, and deterioration. Private landowner stewardship incentives are a lynchpin to better protecting declining bird species.



SHARING OUR SEAS AND SHORES

Long Island's ecosystem is one of the richest veins of biodiversity on the planet and one of the most densely populated areas in the country - home to over 7.7 million people. Human disturbance and water quality impairments from outdated wastewater infrastructure threaten coastal birds and reduce aquatic ecosystem health. Hurricane Sandy highlighted our vulnerabilities along the coast and the importance of safeguarding the natural features and processes that protect coastal infrastructure while providing irreplaceable habitat.



SAVING IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS (IBAs)

The IBA program identifies, monitors, and protects habitats critical to the survival of birds. More than 130 IBAs have been recognized in New York, including several like the Montezuma Wetlands Complex that have been designated as globally significant. In addition, New York State has enacted a Bird Conservation Area (BCA) program, modeled on Audubon's IBAs, that identifies and manages publicly-owned lands critically important to birds. 54 BCAs have been designated to date.



SHAPING A HEALTHY CLIMATE & CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

Climate change has been one of our greatest conservation challenges and has become one of the leading threats to birds and other wildlife in New York and across the nation. Recently, the National Audubon Society's Birds and Climate Change report found that if we don't act now, nearly half of North American birds will suffer the consequences of climate change, leaving them with an uncertain future. Now, more than ever, we have a responsibility to be the voice of the birds and aggressively combat this urgent threat by protecting the places that birds need to thrive now and into the future and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.



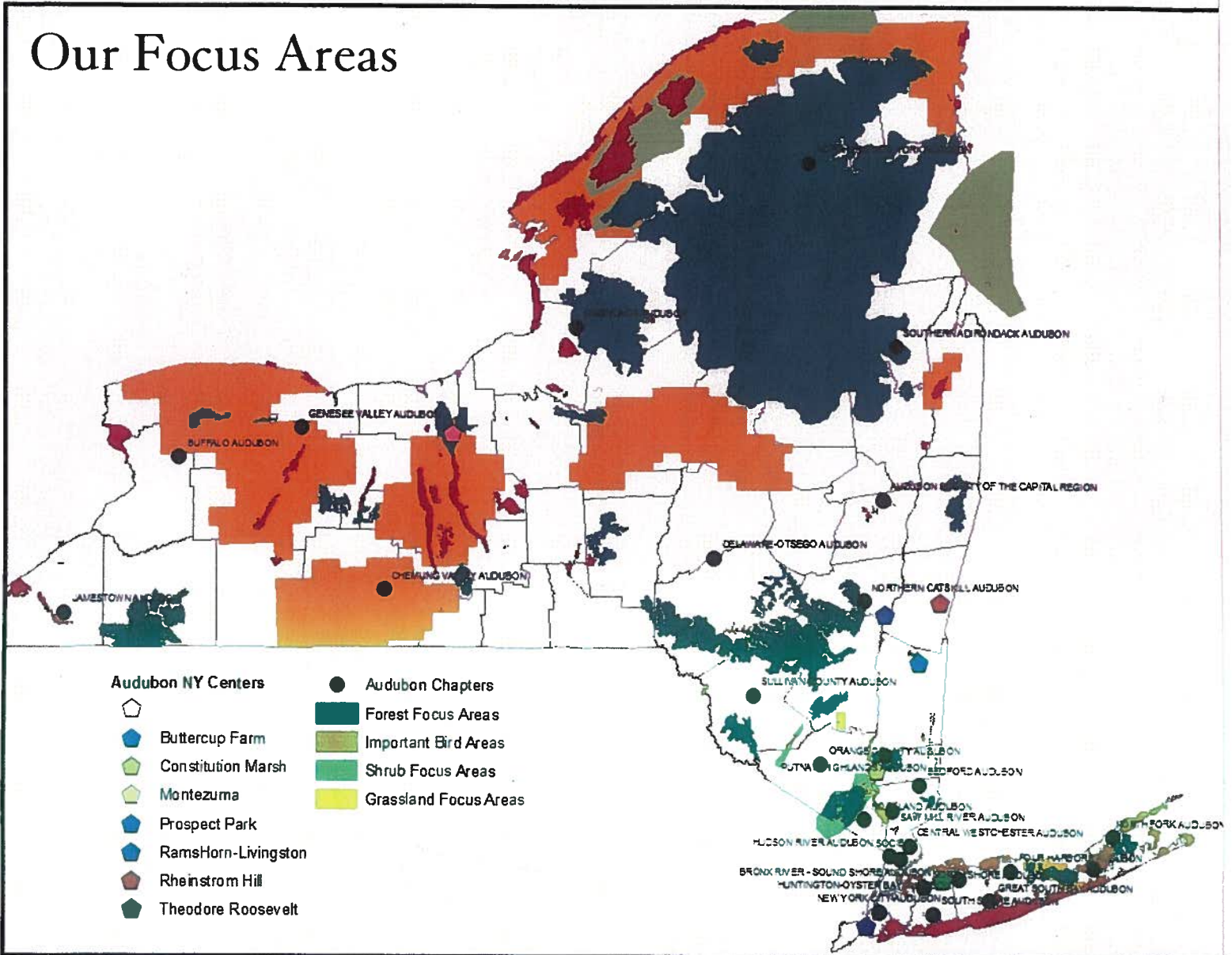
CREATING BIRD-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

From urban cities to rural towns, every level of government can take important steps to ensure New York's municipalities provide habitat for birds. Whether building a new park or nature center, controlling invasive species at an IBA or involving children in habitat enhancement projects, effective long-term conservation must involve actions at the local level. These actions improve local environmental health, and improve quality of life. There are 4 million bird and wildlife watchers in New York who generate an estimated \$4.2 billion in economic activity each year.

The Audubon New York Network

Audubon New York is the State program of the National Audubon Society representing 27 affiliated Chapters, 7 Centers & Sanctuaries, and nearly 50,000 members. Our mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.

Our Focus Areas



Audubon New York's Policy Team:




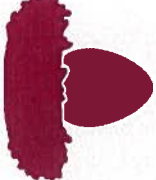


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ADDITIONAL CONSERVATION STRATEGIES

CONSERVATION STRATEGIES	ATLANTIC FLYWAY PRIORITIES	NEW YORK STATE PRIORITIES	FEDERAL PRIORITIES
 <p>Increase Conservation Funding</p>	<p>New funding to support conservation</p>	<p>Support \$200 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) Restore Environmental State Agency Staff</p>	<p>Support funding for: State Wildlife Grants (SWG) Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA)</p>
 <p>Putting Working-Lands to Work for Birds & People</p>	<p>Eastern Forests Eastern Grasslands & Shrublands</p>	<p>Dedicate \$1 million in EPF funding to promote conservation on private lands Reform 480a to incentivize sustainable forest management and wildlife protection</p>	<p>Support increased Farm Bill program funding for: Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)</p>
 <p>Sharing Our Seas & Shores</p>	<p>Coastal Stewardship: Atlantic & Gulf Saving Seabirds: Atlantic & the Caribbean Saltmarsh</p>	<p>Increase investments in wastewater infrastructure upgrades and Green Innovation Grants to improve water quality Address micro-plastic pollution from personal care products</p>	<p>Support increased funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) Direct Federal agencies to: Avoid work in priority beach-nesting bird sites, Avoid activities during the breeding season</p>
 <p>Saving Important Bird Areas</p>	<p>Everglades Ecosystem Long Island Sound Niagara River Montezuma Wetlands Complex Constitution Marsh Onondaga Lake Belize</p>	<p>Increase EPF funding for Open Space and Farmland protection, and Ocean and Great Lakes Conservation Increase NY Works funding for habitat stewardship</p>	<p>Pass the Long Island Sound Restoration and Stewardship Act and provide \$10 million to Long Island Sound Program Support \$300 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI).</p>
 <p>Shaping a Healthy Climate & Clean Energy Future</p>	<p>Help birds adapt to climate change through modeling and adaptation strategies Support energy efficiency & renewable incentives Drive effective policy and practice through expertise about birds</p>	<p>Enact 'Lights Out NY' and encourage bird-smart energy planning Increase investment in "NY SUN" Implement the Community Risk Reduction and Resiliency Act</p>	<p>Support the President's Climate Action Plan and Clean Power Plan to create emission standards on new and existing power plants</p>
 <p>Creating Bird-Friendly Communities</p>	<p>Audubon At Home, Lights Out Citizen-science monitoring opportunities Mobilize and engage a broader audience Nurture and restore Important Bird Areas across the state</p>	<p>Increase EPF funding for invasive species management and zoos, botanical gardens and aquaria (ZBGA) Support the Community Preservation Act</p>	<p>Dedicate new federal funding for State Parks Increase funding for EPA's Environmental Educator Grants</p>

THE BOTTOM LINE: REDUCING THREATS TO 25 PRIORITY SPECIES THROUGHOUT NEW YORK STATE

