Summary and Conservation Plan

for the

Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area
(Vermont and New Hampshire)

Connecticut River in North Walpole: summer 2006 (P. Hunt, photo)

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Background

The Connecticut River is literally a defining feature of New Hampshire and Vermont, forming as it does the common boundary of the two states for nearly 270 miles. In contrast to the forested uplands on either side, the river valley itself contains a mix of agriculture, wetlands, and development, and is different enough to be considered a distinct ecological subsection of the two states. Because it runs north-south it has long been recognized as an important corridor for migrating birds, including numerous waterfowl. Forests, grasslands, and marshes along the river also provide habitat for breeding birds.

Because of its perceived importance to birds, New Hampshire Audubon and Audubon Vermont embarked upon a project to evaluate the river corridor's suitability for the Important Bird Area (IBA) Program. The IBA program is an international effort to identify habitats critical to birds, and to use this recognition to foster conservation of these areas. In the United States it is coordinated by the National Audubon Society and implemented at the state level by independent Audubon societies and state chapters of National Audubon.

With initial funding from the Connecticut River Joint Commissions, the two state Audubon societies undertook a mapping exercise of the Connecticut River in 2004-2005. We used GIS technology to identify segments of the river corridor that contained significant amounts of three habitats: floodplain forest, grasslands, and freshwater wetlands. The mapping was also informed by the limits of the FEMA floodplain and knowledge of bird use. The latter included Bald Eagle sites (breeding or wintering), waterfowl concentration areas, and locations of other bird species of conservation concern (e.g., secretive marsh birds, Cerulean Warbler).

This exercise identified 11 potential IBAs along the river between Massachusetts and the Canadian Border. These were in turn categorized into three levels based on the amount of bird data available to support IBA nomination. Level 1 IBAs were viewed as ready for immediate nomination, Level 2 needed additional data, and Level 3 contained significant habitat but lacked bird data almost entirely. Of these 11 sites, only one – the Herrick's Cove IBA – had previously been recognized by Audubon Vermont. There were no IBAs on the New Hampshire side of the river at that time. Results of this initial mapping and ranking process were presented to the Connecticut River Joint Commissions and local stakeholders at meetings in the spring of 2005.

Moving Forward in the Lower Connecticut Valley

Of the three potential IBAs considered Level 1 in 2005, two were located in the southern stretch of the river: 1) between the Massachusetts border and Brattleboro and 2) between Bellow's Falls and Springfield (including the Herrick's Cove IBA). The third Level 1 IBA is the Moore Reservoir, and it will not be considered further in this document. Given similarities in habitat and avifauna between the two southern areas, New Hampshire Audubon and Audubon Vermont proposed to move them forward together into the nomination process, to be followed by the development of draft conservation strategies that would benefit the birds using the sites. Funding for this second step in the IBA process was again sought and received from the Connecticut River Joint Commissions, and begun in 2006.

The first step was compilation of bird data for the two areas. Because the area is visited fairly regularly by birders on both sides of the river, such data were relatively widespread, albeit not always easily accessible. In New Hampshire, most data came from New Hampshire Bird Records, a database maintained by New Hampshire Audubon and dating to the 1960s. Records from 1990 on were retrieved for inclusion in the IBA nominations. Data for areas on the Vermont side of the river were compiled by local birders, and included monitoring efforts at Herrick's Cove and the Christmas Bird Counts in Brattleboro and Saxton's River. These data were then transferred to the New Hampshire IBA nomination form for each site. At this stage the two potential IBAs were renamed as 1) Hinsdale/Retreat Meadows and 2) Herrick's Cove/Charlestown.

In September 2006, a joint New Hampshire/Vermont technical committee convened to evaluate these two nominations. This committee included representatives from the two Audubon societies, The Nature Conservancy, and the birding community. At this meeting it was agreed that the two IBAs as originally proposed should be combined into one. Although there were relatively few bird data between the two proposed sites, the habitats in the intervening area are very similar. A similar approach was used in New Hampshire when identifying the Merrimack River corridor as an IBA. The combined IBA was officially renamed the Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area (to reflect its position in the entire watershed). It is described briefly below and shown in Figure 1. Minutes from the September meeting, a New Hampshire IBA summary, and the official nomination form are available from New Hampshire Audubon.

Description of the IBA

The Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area (IBA) is a bi-state IBA that recognizes the critical importance of the Connecticut River as a migratory pathway and breeding habitat for a variety of waterfowl and songbirds. The majority of the IBA is located in the Atlantic Northern Forest Bird Conservation Region (BCR 14), with a small portion of the river near the Massachusetts border in the New England/Mid-Atlantic Coast Region (BCR 30). The boundaries of the IBA roughly follow the first terrace up from the present day shoreline of the Connecticut River. This line roughly follows the lowest shoreline of glacial Lake Hitchcock. The IBA completely encompasses boundary of the previously recognized Herrick's Cove IBA. For mapping purposes the boundary of the IBA is 200 feet above the river level, although truncated at tributaries without impounded areas. A map is included at the end of this report.

The IBA is dominated by the Connecticut River and its hydrology. There are two peaking hydroelectric dams within the IBA, one in Bellows Falls and the other in Vernon. As a result, much of the river within the IBA has impounded sections that resemble lakes and provide stopover habitat for a variety of migrating waterfowl including Canada Geese, American Black Ducks, Mallards, Ring-necked Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, and Common and Hooded Mergansers. At the mouths of many of the Connecticut's tributaries, emergent marshes provide habitat for secretive marsh birds (rails, Marsh Wren) and breeding waterfowl (Wood Duck, American Black Duck). During the winter, open water below the dams continues to attract waterfowl, and also provides foraging habitat for Bald eagles. There are also two Bald Eagle nests in the IBA. One below Vernon Dam in Hinsdale has been active since 1999, while one near Herrick's Cove represents one of only two nests in Vermont, and was first occupied in 2006.

Bottomland agriculture is major land use in the IBA. Taking advantage of the rich floodplain soils, the agriculture is a mix of dairy, vegetable and hay farming operations. As a result of the agricultural activity important foraging habitat for waterfowl is present in much of the IBA, and where hay is the primary crop the floodplain also supports small numbers of breeding grassland breeding birds such as Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks. This agricultural activity – in combination with increasing human development – has also as resulted in the elimination of most of the floodplain forest habitat within the IBA. The remnant floodplain forest patches are important in the early spring for neotropical migratory songbirds, in addition to several breeding species that are more common along large rivers (Red-bellied Woodpecker, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher).

More details on how the Middle Connecticut River meets the IBA criteria are available in the IBA summary produced by New Hampshire Audubon and included as an attachment to this report. Recreational use of the river has grown in the last twenty years including birdwatching. The Connecticut River Birding Trail has several stops in the IBA including the Herrick's Cove IBA and the Retreat Meadows. A more detailed description of the conservation issues faced by the IBA is presented as part of the Conservation Plan.

Overview of Conservation Plan

Introduction

On January 31, 2007, New Hampshire Audubon and Audubon Vermont held a one-day meeting to develop a rapid, first-iteration conservation plan for the newly recognized Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area (IBA). Audubon staff were joined in the exercise by representatives of the Connecticut River Joint Commissions, the New Hampshire Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, Upper Valley Land Trust, the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, and TransCanada Northeast power company.

The exercise involved a modified version of the "5S" planning approach created by the Nature Conservancy to develop landscape level conservation plans. The 5S process first identifies the "Systems" (or Targets) of interest in a landscape, which are usually defined as habitats, species, or groups of species. For each target, conservation planners identify "Stresses" (or immediate threats) to the target and the ultimate "Source" of each stress. For example, increased sediment runoff would be a stress to an aquatic system, while the source of the runoff could be timber harvesting or development. Once stresses and sources are described, planners can take the next – and critical – step or developing "Strategies" that might either reduce the stresses or restore the system to a more natural condition. A final step is to create measures of "Success" that can be used to evaluate progress in the future.

For the purposes of the Middle Connecticut River IBA, the 5S process was modified to focus specifically on individual bird species, groups or birds, or bird habitats. It is acknowledged that a similar exercise had previously been completed for the river as a whole, but this did not necessarily deal specifically with the avian components of the system. The meeting on January

31 began with an overview of the IBA (summarized previously in this report) so that all stakeholders were familiar with the reasons the Middle Connecticut River was recognized as an IBA, followed by a quick brainstorming session to identify components of a vision statement for the IBA. The group then spent the rest of the day identifying target conservation systems or species; the stresses and sources of stress to those systems; and strategies for reducing the stresses to the IBA. The group did not attempt to develop measures of success for these strategies, and these would require more detail on a given strategy including – in some cases – development of more specific numerical goals.

While this modified approach forced the group to move quickly through six target systems, it yielded strategies which the group believes can be implemented in partnership with other conservation organizations, government agencies, and the communities along the river. The result can be the enhancement of the Connecticut River as habitat for breeding and migrating bird populations. We recognize that this is a first step and hope in future years as we implement the strategies identified that the plan will be refined as we learn more, see progress, and build partnerships.

The results of the planning meeting are presented in three pieces: 1) a vision statement, 2) an overview of the conservation targets, and 3) draft threats and strategies. The latter are presented as a series of tables at the end of the document.

Vision for the IBA

The Middle Connecticut River Important Bird Area will be maintained to enhance its year-round value for bird species and the people who enjoy them. The IBA will be an outstanding feature in the larger continental bird migration route connected to the IBA and will provide connectivity to adjacent upland ecosystems in northern New England and to breeding habitats far to the north in Canada. In addition to its critical role in bird migration, the IBA will provide excellent breeding habitat in the grasslands, wetlands, and forests within its boundary. During the winter the open water and sheltered locations will provide valuable habitat for waterfowl and Bald Eagles.

The recognition of the area as an IBA will spark interest and action in protecting and restoring the target habitats and focal bird species. Grasslands will be managed with an eye to providing nesting habitat for Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrows, and other grassland breeding birds. A healthy and growing Bald Eagle population will nest in the riparian forests and make use of the open water during the winter months. The residents and visitors in surrounding landscape will appreciate, value, and enjoy the birds and their habitats in the IBA and they will actively support and carry out conservation activities designed to enhance value of the IBA as habitat and a place to view and enjoy birds. The recognition of the floodplain as an IBA will be incorporated into state, regional and town plans. Those plans will identify and implement strategies to conserve the important features of the IBA. In addition, the IBA will be a focus area for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge will work with communities to protect important lands, monitor bird populations and develop and implement education programs for the IBA. Likewise the Connecticut River Joint Commissions will continue to support efforts to promote and conserve the IBA's critical features. The IBA will complement

and enhance the many values the Connecticut River offers the region and the efforts to conserve the IBA will also benefit other aquatic and terrestrial wildlife and the human communities as well.

Connecticut River IBA Conservation Targets

Audubon Vermont and New Hampshire Audubon developed the following ecological system targets for the Middle Connecticut River IBA. The system targets were developed based on the birds that migrate through, breed in, or overwinter in the IBA. The systems identified are natural communities or ecosystems that provide the habitat that attracts birds to the IBA. The Bald Eagle was treated as a separate target given its importance in the Connecticut River valley, as the only Bald Eagle nesting site in the state of Vermont. For each system, we identified the key ecological attributes that contribute to overall condition of the system. Our planning process ranked the condition based on opinions of the participants in the planning process.

1. Grasslands, fields and wet meadows (waterfowl foraging areas, grassland birds)
    Condition: Poor (breeding - passerines), Fair (migration- waterfowl)
    Key Ecological Attributes
        a) patch size (size) greater than 40 acres
        b) area of habitat (size)
        c) agricultural management and resulting cover type (condition)
        d) populations of focal birds (condition)

2. Hardwood riverine floodplain forests (a variety of songbird species)
    Condition: Poor (Rare today)
    Key Ecological Attributes
        a) populations of focal birds (condition)
        b) area of habitat and distribution (size)
        c) forest structure and regeneration (condition)
        d) species composition - plants (condition)
        e) hydrology

3. Emergent to shrubby wetlands (oxbows and backwaters) (waterfowl, marshbirds)
    Condition: Good (invasives low now but could be a problem)
    Key Ecological Attributes
        a) area of Habitat
        b) hydrology
        c) vegetation composition
        d) populations of focal birds (condition)
        e) width of buffer (transitional edge)

4. Open water (river) and impoundments (waterfowl, Bald Eagle)
    Condition: Good
    Key ecological attributes
        a) depth of open water
        b) ice-free status

c) flow rates
d) water quality

5. Erosional river bluff (kingfisher, swallows)
Condition: unknown (need a baseline)
Key ecological Attributes
a) height
b) soils/geology
c) persistence (multiple years in existence)
d) populations of focal birds (condition)

6. Bald Eagle/Osprey (Although Ospreys do not currently breed within the IBA, suitable habitat exists and future breeding is possible. Osprey has thus been included in this target because the two species have similar needs.)
Condition: Good (Bald Eagle), Unknown (Osprey)
Key ecological Attributes
a) suitable nesting structure/sites
b) number of breeding pairs
c) winter population and foraging and roosting sites (Eagles only)
d) open water conditions

Threats and Conservation Strategies

In the tables that follow we have listed both an overview of the major threats facing each of the six conservation targets, with a general ranking for each. The second part of each table lists and ranks the conservation strategies that were developed at the January 31 planning meeting. By intent, these strategies are kept brief, with the intent that each can be developed in more detail – including measures of success – by parties interested in implementing that strategy.

The habitat viewed as most at risk in the IBA is clearly the mix of agricultural lands in the floodplain. Pressures related to both development and conversion of corn to less suitable foraging habitat threaten to reduce the amount of habitat available to migrating waterfowl over time. These same factors also threaten the continued existence of agriculture as a traditional land use in the Connecticut River valley. At the same time, grassland nesting songbirds are often unable to reproduce successfully in fields that are actively mowed for hay, and there is need to consider late mowing in areas that are no longer used or less suitable for agriculture.

The other target considered poor is floodplain forest, much of which has already been lost within the IBA. To the extent possible, further losses should be minimized, and it may be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of restoring this important habitat in areas where there is high potential for success. The remaining four system targets were believed to be in good or unknown condition, and will not be discussed in detail beyond the information in the accompanying tables.

Target 1: Grasslands, fields, wet meadows (waterfowl foraging areas, grassland birds)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) patch size (size) greater than 40 acres
b) area of habitat (size)
c) agricultural management and resulting cover type (condition)
d) populations of focal birds (condition)

Status: Poor (breeding - passerines), Fair (migration - waterfowl)

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank
Habitat Loss and Fragmentation	High to Very High	Residential, Commercial and Industrial development	Very High
Habitat Degradation	High	Early summer mowing	High
		Meso-predators (cats)	Unknown
Conversion to less suitable agricultural type	High	Vegetable Farming (also strawberries, sod)	High
		Bio-mass production (corn)	Medium

Threat	Habitat Loss and Fragmentation	Threat level: High to Very High
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Eliminate the permanent loss of grassland, fields and wet meadow in the IBA.	Make landowners aware of available cost-share programs (WHIP, CREP, EQIP)	Medium
	Advocate for the reauthorization and funding of cost share programs	High
	Develop a working relationship with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to discuss bird conservation needs	Medium
	Advocate for Current Use programs to allow for conservation practices to be incorporated into plans without disqualifying land. (Focus on areas that are important for birds or other wildlife area.)	High
	Identify priority agricultural lands to maintain benefits for birds through various land protection strategies.	Very High
	Participate in Conte Refuge CCP process to promote IBA strategies	High
	Advocate for new federal and state money to protect land through fee and easements that will benefit bird habitat	High
	Develop information for land trusts on management strategies for birds	High
	Bird farm strategy (delayed mowing)	Medium
	Develop education material for landowners that will raise awareness of the importance of the area for birds	High
	Develop acceptable desirable future condition with habitat percentages for the IBA (total and by parcel sizes)	Medium

	Share information on IBAs with towns, planning and conservation commissions, RPCs, Watershed groups, Audubon chapters)	High
	Model language for land management plan objectives and review methods and potential partners.	High
	Initiate dialogue with Ag agencies on IBA priorities and strategies especially for Ag research and development activities.	Medium
	Develop bird friend criteria for open space zoning requirements.	Low
	Ban development in flood plain. Review new FEMA maps	Low
	Promote coordinated land management in IBA (Conservation mapping exercise, seek funding from CRJC)	Medium
	Support VT shoreland protection efforts	High
Threat:	**Conversion to less suitable agricultural type (vegetable farming vineyards)**	**Threat level: High**
Objective	**Strategy (*many strategies under the previous threat will also address this threat*)**	**Rank**
Maintain current amount of viable habitat in IBA	Determine current amount of viable habitat and rates of conversion to less suitable types	Medium
Threat:	**Habitat Degradation (mowing)**	**Threat level: Medium**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Reduce the number of grassland acres mowed before July 15th.	Develop mowing education information	Medium
	Determine the number of acres of grassland currently mowed before July 15th in order to establish a current benchmark	Medium
	Determine optimum amount of grassland habitat maintained by delayed mowing	Medium
	Support cost share increases for delayed mowing in fed and state ag programs	Medium

Target 2: Hardwood riverine floodplain forests (a variety of songbird species)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) populations of focal birds (condition)
b) area of habitat and distribution (size)
c) forest structure and regeneration (condition)
d) species composition - plants (condition)
e) hydrology

Status: Poor (rare today)

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank
Habitat loss (development)	High	Residential, commercial and agricultural development in floodplain	High
Fragmentation (development, transportation)	High	Residential, commercial and agricultural development in floodplain	High
Invasive species (knotweed, buckthorn, bittersweet)	Medium	Adjacent Source populations of exotics	Medium
		Residential and commercial landscaping	Medium
Reduced recruitment of dominant tree species	Medium	Altered flow regimes	High?
		Invasive plants	Medium

Threat	**Habitat loss/fragmentation**	**Threat level: High**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Maintain or increase acres of floodplain forest in the IBA.	Promote the conservation of floodplain forests as a priority with local land trusts	High
	Amend Current Use programs to allow inclusion of floodplain forests as conservation land	High
	Promote restoration of flood plain forests through CREP, WHIP, and WRP	Medium
	Support VT Shoreland Prot efforts	High
Threat	**Invasives**	**Threat level: Medium**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Stop the spread of exotic invasive plants especially bittersweet, buckthorn, and japanese knotweed	Update invasive species inventory on the river and incorporate into maps.	Medium
	Support education and outreach efforts with public on invasives	Medium

Target 3: Emergent to shrubby wetlands (oxbows and backwaters) (waterfowl,marshbirds)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) area of habitat
b) hydrology
c) vegetation composition
d) populations of focal birds (condition)
e) width of buffer (transitional edge)

Status: Good (invasives low now but could be a problem)

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank
Altered flow regimes	Low	Dam operations	Low
Invasive species	Medium	Inter-waterway boat traffic	High
		Escape from cultivation	Medium
		Spread resulting from road maintenance	Medium
Chemical contamination	Unknown	Agriculture	Medium
		Road runoff	Medium
		Atmospheric deposition (mercury)	Low
Habitat loss (development, draining, filling)	Medium	Residential, Commercial, and industrial development	Medium
		Filling or flooding through altered flow regimes?	Low
Reduced reproductive success	Unknown	Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Low

Threat	**Invasive species**	**Threat level: Medium**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Stop the spread of exotic invasive plants especially purple loosestrife, phragmites, japanese knotweed	Update invasive species inventory on the river and incorporate into maps.	Medium
	Support education and outreach efforts with public and road crews on invasives	Medium
	Discuss with agencies opportunity to include wetlands invasives in cost share program	Medium
Threat:	**Habitat loss (development, draining, filling)**	**Threat level: Medium**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Minimize or eliminate degradation of existing wetlands within the IBA	Support shoreland protection legislation in VT and locally	High
Maintain or enhance marshbird populations	Obtain baseline for marshbird populations in IBA.	Medium
	Implement long-term marshbird monitoring program	Medium

Target 4: Open water (river) and Impoundments (waterfowl, Bald Eagle)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) depth of open water
b) ice-free status
c) flow rates
d) water quality
e) food supply

Status: Good

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank: Low
Altered foraging opportunities	Low	Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Low
		Dam operation (alters extent of winter open water?)	Low
Reduced survival during migration	Low	Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Low
		Dam operation (alters extent of winter open water?)	Low
		Chemical contamination	Low

Threat: waterfowl distrurbance and/or mortality		Threat level: Low
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Obtain baseline data on spatial and temporal patterns of waterfowl use within the IBA so as to better understand the potential future impacts of land use changes within the IBA	Establish a long term waterfowl monitoring program focused on key foraging and roosting habitats as identified through mapping and examination of existing data	Medium
Given the overall low threats to this target, additional conservation strategies have not been developed at this time. See the sections on Agricultural Lands, Bald Eagle and Wetlands for some comparable strategies.		

Target 5: Erosional river bluff (kingfisher, swallows)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) height
b) soils/geology
c) persistence (multiple years in existence)
d) Populations of focal birds (condition)

Status: unknown (need a baseline)

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank
Reduced reproductive success	Unknown	Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Low
		Recreation (camping below bluffs)	Low
Habitat loss (erosion of bank)	Medium?	Recreation (camping below bluffs)	Low
		Development at top of bluff	Low
		Altered flow regimes (undermining of bank, flooding)	Unknown

Threat: habitat loss and reduced reproductive success		**Threat level: Low**
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Reduce loss of habitat	Work with bluff owners on habitat preservation	Low
Obtain baseline data on size and distribution of Bank Swallow colonies within the IBA, so as to measure future changes and assess actual magnitude of threats	Create citizen science program to map and monitor swallow colonies in the IBA.	Low

Target 6: Bald Eagle/Osprey (Bald Eagle)

Key Ecological Attributes

a) suitable nesting structure/sites
b) number of breeding pairs
c) winter population and foraging and roosting sites (Eagles only)
d) open water conditions

Status: Good (Bald eagle), Unknown (Osprey)

Stresses	Rank	Sources	Rank
Insufficient Reproductive Success	Low	Lack of suitable nesting sites	Unknown
		Contaminants (Mercury, PCB, DDT) Road runoff (PAHs) Atmospheric deposition of Mercury	Medium-High
		Predation	Low
		Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Low
		Inadequate riparian buffers	Medium

Mercury and other contaminants (PCBs) – effects on bird reproduction

Threat	Human disturbance (watercraft, inappropriate birding)	Threat level: Low
Objective	**Strategy**	**Rank**
Prevent Bald Eagle nest failures due to human activity	Promote updating of Jet Ski regulations to cover 4-seat jet skis.	Low
	Get Jetski companies to donate jetskis to Marine Patrol to improve enforcement.	Low
	Work with insurance regulators to have insurance rates increase with jet ski infractions.	Low
	Create roadside buffers	Medium
	Promote birding ethics material at tourist information centers and kayak and canoe rental shops.	Medium

Implementation of the Conservation Plan

Since this plan was originally developed, New Hampshire Audubon received funding from TransCanada to explore the possibility of a conservation partnership that would promote and implement the strategies outlined in the plan. The agencies and organizations listed in the table below attended an exploratory meeting of this potential partnership in January 2008, and the first seven have continued meeting to refine the purpose of the partnership.

Agency/Organization	**Representative**
New Hampshire Audubon	Pam Hunt
Audubon Vermont	Jim Shallow
The Nature Conservancy	Doug Bechtel
Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation	Marie Caduto
Trust for Public Land	Clem Clay
Connecticut River Joint Commissions	Adair Mulligan
US Fish and Wildlife Service, Silvio Conte Refuge	Barry Parrish
NH Fish and Game Department	Ed Robinson
UNH Cooperative Extension	Matt Tarr
Windham Conservation District	Jolene Hamilton
Windham Regional Planning Commission	John Bennett
US Fish and Wildlife Service, Atlantic Coast Joint Venture	Mitch Hartley

One goal of this informal partnership is to use the Connecticut River's Important Bird Area status to leverage future conservation projects, including the various strategies outlined in the original conservation plan. It is worth noting that three of the partners already have active programs within the larger Connecticut River watershed.

1) The Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge includes the entire watershed, and has land protection projects in all four states (but not currently within the IBA).
2) The Trust for Public Lands' Connecticut River Program seeks to protect land and community resources along the entire river.
3) The Nature Conservancy's Connecticut River Program, while encompassing the entire watershed, is currently focused on restoring the altered hydrology on some of the river's major tributaries.

Rather than duplicating these existing efforts, the IBA partnership seeks to compliment them by focusing on a smaller section of the river and the specific conservation needs of birds and their habitats. Birds have the benefits of being highly visible organisms, popular with the general public, and often tied to important funding opportunities (e.g., the North American Wetlands Conservation Act). By acting together, the partners have access to resources, expertise, and community connections that are not available to each individually. The partnership is being modeled on the very successful Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership that operates in southeastern New Hampshire, and which has conserved over 5000 acres since its creation.

Under this model, the partners would identify and prioritize areas most in need of conservation activity, in many cases through land protection through fee or easement. At this

stage, there is no formal partnership to implement this process, nor a single entity identified as a land agent. To this end the partnership has developed an additional conservation strategy that complements all the more specific strategies outlined in the conservation plan. A key question revolves around the degree to which such a partnership is needed in the IBA, in light of the existing conservation activity discussed previously. This strategy is as follows:

Strategy: Create Middle Connecticut River Conservation Partnership
Target: Middle Connecticut River IBA

There are three alternative forms for this proposed partnership:

1) The partnership would become formalized, and move toward creating a funded coordinator position, as per the Great Bay model. The coordinator's roles would include fundraising, direct interaction with local partners, and ongoing coordination of the partnership's projects. This is essentially a proactive strategy, and maximizes the partnership's ability to act on the most important conservation priorities.
2) The current loose partnership would be maintained. Partners would meet with some regularity and discuss potential projects as they present themselves. These would be "assigned" to the partner with the most appropriate capacity, resources, or expertise. Individual partners would participate as needed and/or appropriate. This is more of a reactive strategy, and requires less initial and sustained funding.
3) The partnership would work to better incorporate the IBA strategies into the existing programs already focused on the Connecticut River. This could be accomplished both through more regular communication (along the lines of Alternative 2) and making the IBA strategies more broadly available to conservation practitioners within the IBA.

The current partnership will seek input on these alternatives from local and regional stakeholders at a meeting tentatively planned for the spring of 2009. These stakeholders include state and federal agencies, town conservation commissions, universities, land trusts, and other non-governmental organizations.

It is worth pointing out that some of the strategies outlined in the conservation plan have already been implemented to some degree. The Middle Connecticut River IBA has been proposed as a focus area within the Silvio Conte refuge, to be evaluated as the refuge develops its Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Two research projects at Antioch New England involve birds within the IBA. One seeks to evaluate the effects of invasive plants on floodplain forest bird communities, and the other will investigate the characteristics of waterfowl stopover habitat. In addition, two partners (NH Audubon and the Connecticut River Joint Commissions) helped the Hinsdale Historical Society complete a NAWCA grant application to purchase an historic property along the river that also includes a significant amount of floodplain and wetland habitat.

Acknowledgements

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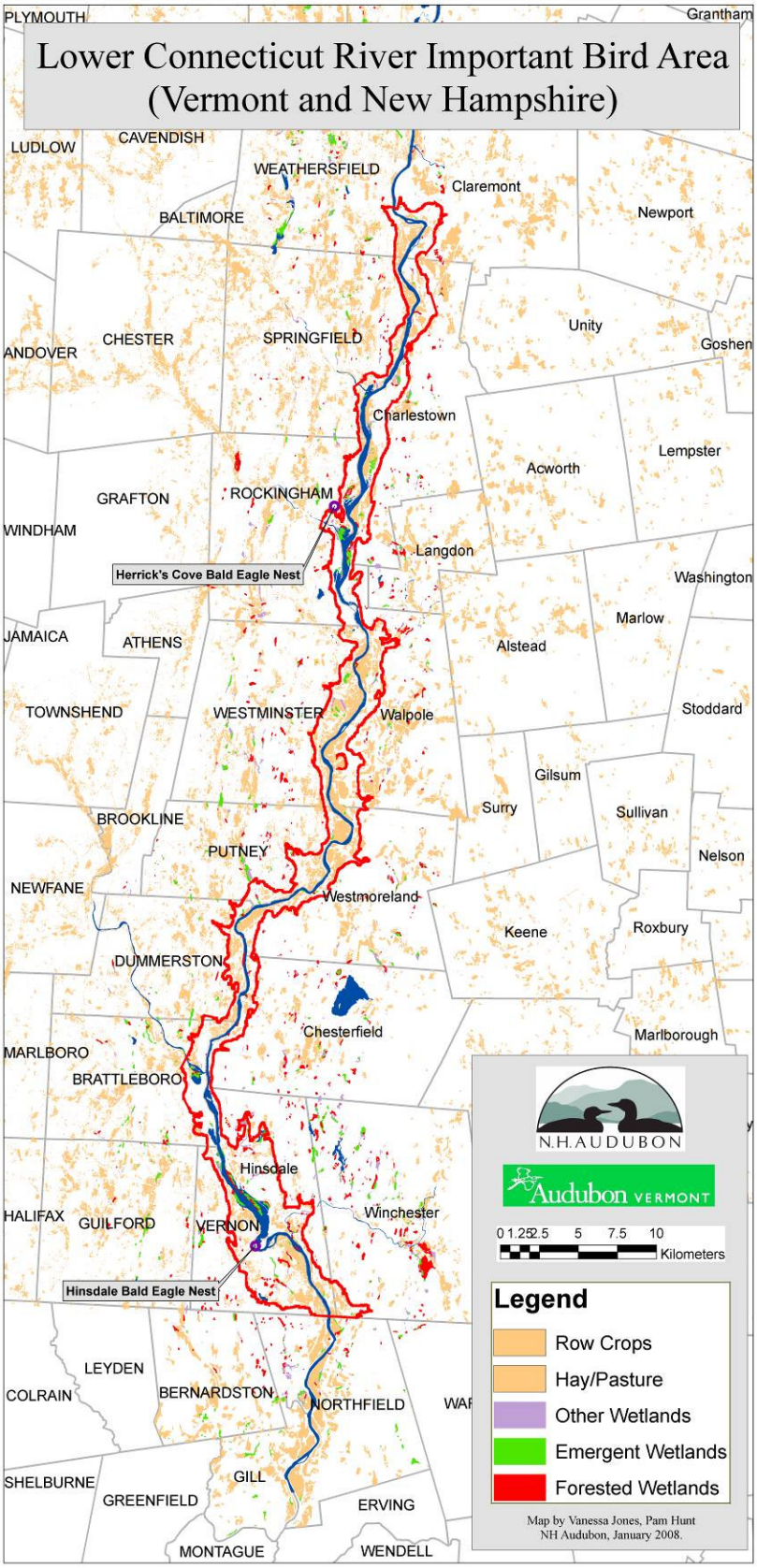
Lower Connecticut River Important Bird Area
(Vermont and New Hampshire)
PLYMOUTH
Grantham
LUDLOW
CAVENDISH
WEATHERSFIELD
Claremont
Newport
BALTIMORE
Unity
Goshen
ANDOVER
CHESTER
SPRINGFIELD
Charlestown
Lempster
Acworth
GRAFTON
ROCKINGHAM
WINDHAM
Langdon
Herrick's Cove Bald Eagle Nest
Washington
Marlow
JAMAICA
ATHENS
Alstead
TOWNSHEND
WESTMINSTER
Walpole
Stoddard
Gilsum
Surry
Sullivan
BROOKLINE
PUTNEY
Nelson
NEWFANE
Westmoreland
Keene
Roxbury
DUMMERSTON
Chesterfield
Marlborough
MARLBORO
BRATTLEBORO
Hinsdale
HALIFAX
GUILFORD
VERNON
Winchester
Hinsdale Bald Eagle Nest
LEYDEN
COLRAIN
BERNARDSTON
NORTHFIELD
SHELBURNE
GILL
GREENFIELD
ERVING
MONTAGUE
WENDELL
N.H. AUDUBON
Audubon VERMONT
0 1.25 2.5 5 7.5 10
Kilometers
Legend
Row Crops
Hay/Pasture
Other Wetlands
Emergent Wetlands
Forested Wetlands
Map by Vanessa Jones, Pam Hunt
NH Audubon, January 2008.