

BIRD CONSERVATION*WINTERING GROUNDS 1996

Migratory Birds

Zone Defense

The Department of Defense supports hawks and doves in the Panama Canal Zone

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (DOD), through the Partners in Flight Program, is helping prepare for the historic transfer of the Panama Canal from the United States to Panama in the year 2000. At stake is the future of Panama's economy and natural heritage, and an extraordinary corridor of natural forest that provides critical habitat for neotropical migratory and resident birds. The recently drafted DOD/Partners in Flight conservation plan for the Canal Zone may be one key to ensuring that both economic and conservation values are recognized in this historic area.

Panama's biological and cultural diversity, and its strategic significance, are unparalleled in the Western Hemisphere. Although many people may be familiar with the legendary feats of the canal builders, few realize that DOD continues to occupy about 60,000 acres of land along the Canal, stretching from Atlantic to Pacific. Initially preserved to provide a thick jungle cover to protect the Canal from ground attack and prevent siltation, the tropical rainforests on these DOD lands remain largely intact. They now provide valuable habitat for resident birds as well as some of the most critical stopover and wintering habitat for neotropical migrants in Central America.

When the Canal reverts

As a result of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty the DOD landholdings will revert back to the Republic of Panama in the year 2000. In anticipation of this land reversion, the military mission in Panama has focused on some environmental matters. In 1992, through the Legacy Resource Management Program, DOD funded a rapid ecological assessment with The Nature Conservancy and the Asociacion Nacional para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza (ANCON). In 1994 DOD provided funding to the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, and the Illinois Natural History Survey to develop a long-term monitoring program for migratory and resident bird populations.

Not surprisingly these studies have confirmed that the Canal Watershed's relatively undisturbed rainforests support, acre-for-acre, some of Central America's greatest diversity and abundance of flora and fauna. For example, about 565 species of birds have been recorded in the Canal Zone area, of which 120 are neotropical migrants that nest in the U.S. and Canada. Familiar migrants such as Bay-breasted Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Acadian Flycatcher are abundant in the Canal Zone. The Canal Zone's habitats are also critical for resident birds such as Great Potoo, Slaty-backed Falcon, Crimson-bellied Woodpecker, Gray-cheeked Nunlet, and Spot-crowned Barbet.

The continued availability of Canal Zone habitats to birds and the people of Panama rests with the country's decisions on how to develop and/or conserve DOD's land holdings. DOD, with help from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Partners in Flight International Working Group, is helping ensure that bird and habitat conservation values are part of any decision made about the Canal Zone.

In March 1996, DOD convened a meeting to address future use of the reverting lands. The objective of the meeting was to bring the right group of scientists and land managers together with the Autoridad de la Region Interoceanica (ARI) and the Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales Renovables (INRENARE), Panama's conservation agencies, to develop recommendations and ideas for the preservation and low impact use of these valuable areas.

Land Along the Canal is a
unique and valuable resource
for the Western Hemisphere.

Consensus among the group was reached quickly. The most valuable lands were delineated on maps produced by ANCON and conclusions were developed, all of which have been articulated (in both Spanish and English) in a document titled "The Key Role of Specific Land in the Panama Canal Area in Preserving the Value of Panama's Natural Heritage." The Working Group concluded that the undeveloped lands along the West Bank of the Panama Canal are unique and valuable natural and cultural resources for the Western Hemisphere and for Panama for a variety of reasons.

West Bank lands provide a biological link between North and South America for neotropical migratory birds, and they help to maintain biodiversity, especially the extremely rich resident and migratory bird populations. They preserve water quality and control erosion, and have potential to provide significant and sustainable revenues from ecotourism, scientific research, non-timber forest products, biodiversity prospecting, reforestation, and carbon sequestration.

A 1995 Pacific Asian Travel Association survey of North American tour operators indicate that 62 percent of their customers want to see rainforests, and 71 percent identified Central and South America as their preferred destinations. The top five motivations for travel were to see undisturbed natural areas, learn about nature, visit tropical forests, watch birds, and photograph beautiful vistas with wildlife. The West Bank of the Canal meets all of these criteria. The current military infrastructure could facilitate an ecotourism industry with little modification. Another advantage is that conservation-based ecotourism of this type distributes economic benefits to both rural and urban residents.

Simply witnessing the Gatun Locks in operation as you travel to historic Fort San Lorenzo will put you in awe of the Canal. Looking out from the fort into the Caribbean it's easy to visualize the pirate Henry Morgan roaming the mouth of the Rio Chagres River. Just minutes away from the fort you can hike down a nature trail while watching white-faced monkeys and anteaters, listening to the bizarre sounds of the Motmot, and observing many of the neotropical migrants you see back home.

The International Working Group is hopeful that the conclusions formulated in its report will be used by DOD decision-makers to continue conserving these valuable lands and facilitating conservation-based ecotourism. The Working Group is also optimistic that a dialogue will continue through the Partners in Flight Program to provide a forum from which STRI, ARI, INRENARE, ANCON, Panama Audubon Society, and other partners can promote sound land management decisions for the reverting land. It is through their input and motivation that the success of our efforts will be determined.

- Joe Hautzenroder, DOD PIF Coordinator