

# Song of Salvation

*A bold, new funding plan for species of concern could revolutionize conservation*

*By Roger Di Silvestro*

A male dickcissel bird is perched on a branch with green leaves. The bird has a yellow breast, a grey head with a yellow stripe above the eye, and a black throat. Its beak is open as if it is singing.

Once alive with the sound of music, hills and grasslands across much of the United States are growing increasingly silent. In western grasslands, the music has traditionally come from songbirds warbling territorial claims. But for the past few decades, grassland bird numbers have been dwindling. The eastern meadowlark is declining in 33 states, the grasshopper sparrow in 25, the horned lark in 24 and the vesper sparrow in 18. Populations of some grassland bird species, such as the dickcissel, are down more than 90 percent. Overall, U.S. grassland birds are disappearing faster than birds of other habitats.

“A variety of factors are likely affecting the birds,” says David Klute, species conservation unit supervisor for Colorado Parks and Wildlife. “We have habitat loss, pesticides and changes in the wintering grounds of migratory bird species.” New scientific research would help biologists protect the birds, but such studies are expensive. “There’s a real need for more basic

In the hills of Oklahoma, a male dickcissel warbles a springtime song. The species is in decline, but new conservation funding could help it rebound.

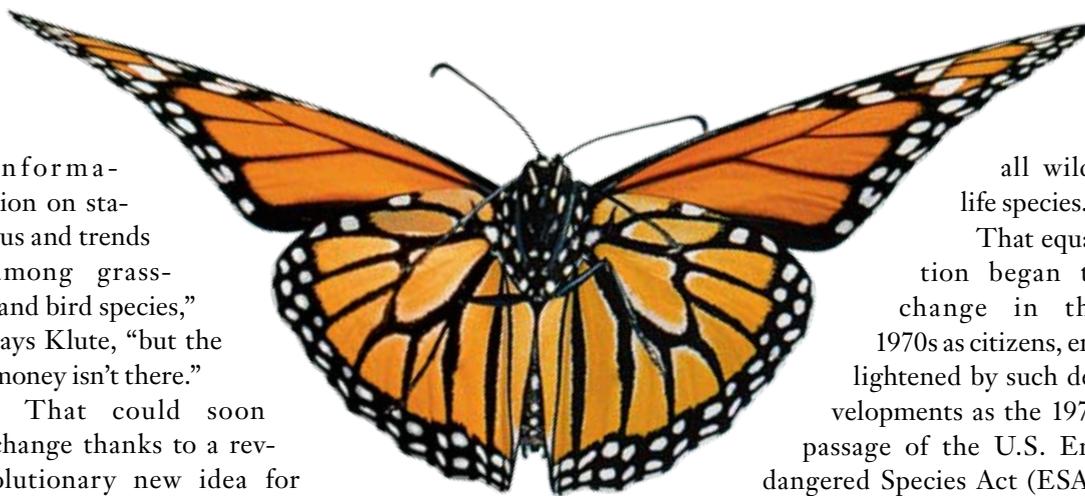
information on status and trends among grassland bird species,” says Klute, “but the money isn’t there.”

That could soon change thanks to a revolutionary new idea for channeling funds to declining songbirds and a host of other at-risk species. Like all revolutions, this one may be an uphill fight—but winning it would transform conservation in this nation.

### Early focus on saving game

Fish and wildlife conservation in the United States took root when hunters, anglers and other conservationists—including the National Wildlife Federation—rallied to restore decimated game species. At their urging, the U.S. Congress in 1937 passed the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act and, in 1950, the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act. These laws funnel money from federal excise taxes on the sale of hunting and fishing gear to the states for wildlife management. Combined with fees from hunting and fishing licenses, permits and the sale of conservation stamps, these funds pay for about 80 percent of state wildlife budgets, which, because of the funding source, have focused on game animals.

This historic approach to funding has been “a tremendous success for the conservation of game species,” says Jeff Crane, president of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation. Indeed, over time, the two federal laws have contributed billions of dollars to state game management efforts and have helped restore thriving populations of wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, pronghorn and myriad other species. But with a focus primarily on game, the nation never developed a steady stream of funding to manage the entire range of species, including those that are not hunted or fished—the vast majority of



STEPHEN DALTON (MINDEN PICTURES)

all wildlife species.

That equation began to change in the 1970s as citizens, enlightened by such developments as the 1973 passage of the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA), became more aware of threats to wildlife populations. Gradually, the states developed programs designed to protect a broad range of species—from bluebirds and butterflies to bog turtles and horned toads—marking the start of a new era in wildlife conservation.

No dedicated funding mechanisms existed for this effort, however, so the states scrambled to invent them. One of the most popular was a check box on state income-tax forms allowing taxpayers to donate a portion of their refunds to conservation. But this approach provided only a fraction of the amount needed and fluctuated from year to year.

### Birth of a new ethic

A more concerted effort took shape in 2000, when Congress passed the Wildlife Conservation Restoration Program, which allowed states



STEVE GETTLE (MINDEN PICTURES)

Collaborative efforts saved the New England cottontail rabbit (above) from ESA listing. A similar approach could help revive declining monarch butterflies (top)—if funding comes through.

to apply for grants to fund wildlife management. As a result, all states developed state wildlife action plans (SWAPs), science-based plans that have identified more than 12,000 species of plants and animals considered in “greatest conservation need,” of which nearly 1,600 are already listed under the ESA.

Funding for SWAPs primarily comes from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (SWG) program, which allocates funds to states using a formula based on factors such as size and population. Unfortunately, Congress has never provided steady funding for the program, so states have to lobby for new appropriations every year. Since the program began, Congress has only approved an average of \$68 million a year for the states, a

figure vastly below the estimated \$1.3 billion a year it would take to support state SWAPs.

Nevertheless, states, in collaboration with public and private partners, have “managed to do a lot with these limited resources,” says Naomi Edelson, NWF’s senior director of wildlife partnerships. Among notable successes, river otters have been restored to parts of North Carolina, fishers and wolverines are recovering in the Pacific Northwest, the Arctic grayling is rebounding in Montana and the Canada lynx is resurging in Maine, one of 14 states where, in 2000, FWS listed it as threatened.

ESA listings have helped recover several dwindling species, many of which have come back to such healthy levels that they’ve been delisted, including gray whales, Steller sea lions and peregrine falcons. Yet listings also create significant expense and land-use restrictions, which is why much of the focus of SWAPs is to manage species so they remain common enough to avoid listing. “Right now, we have thousands of species that need better conservation measures to protect them,” says NWF President Collin O’Mara. “With vulnerable wildlife species, an ounce of prevention can avoid a costly pound of cure.”



JURGEN AND CHRISTINE SOHNS (FLPA/MINDEN PICTURES)

## NWF IN ACTION

### A history of work for wildlife

The National Wildlife Federation and its affiliates have worked on the conservation of nongame species for decades, including the Florida Wildlife Federation’s (FWF) efforts on behalf of wood storks (above) and the Everglades, the Nebraska Wildlife Federation’s focus on sandhill cranes and New Jersey Audubon’s work on songbirds and their habitat.

In 1991, NWF became a founding member of the Teaming with Wildlife Coalition, more than 6,300 groups supporting increased public funding for wildlife conservation through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program. “We’ve supported funding for fish and wildlife conservation for species that are harvested as well as those that are not because, in nature, species are interrelated in a web,” says FWF President Manley Fuller. The Blue Ribbon Panel’s new funding plan, he says, “will be another very useful tool in the conservation tool kit.” For more information, visit [www.nwf.org/TeamingWithWildlife](http://www.nwf.org/TeamingWithWildlife).

### Applying lessons of success

Conservationists have succeeded at keeping some vanishing species off the list. One example is the New England cottontail rabbit. Once abundant throughout New England, the species declined dramatically due to the loss of its young-forest habitat and competition from the eastern cottontail. “We’ve lost about 75 percent of the rabbit’s historical range in New Hampshire,” says John Kanter, supervisor of nongame and endangered wildlife programs for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

By 2006, the cottontail was so at risk that FWS made it a candidate for ESA listing, which would have put tight regulations on land management. However, cooperation among several New England states yielded a conservation plan that involved captive breeding of the rabbits and restoration of young forests. FWS accepted the states’ plan in lieu of federal action, dropping the proposed listing last year.

This outcome helps businesses and landowners because the states’ plan allows for more flexible management than would a plan under the ESA, says Kanter. State biologists can adjust the



JAMES WELIVER (U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE)



CHARLIE SUMMERS (NPL/MINDEN PICTURES)

Green eartags on Canada lynx kittens in Maine (top) helped researchers track them during a multiyear study of the now-recovering species. Arctic grayling (above) are also rebounding thanks to careful—and costly—study.

level of protection from area to area depending on the intensity of threat to the rabbit. A similar, negotiated approach among state agencies and local business interests recently kept the greater sage-grouse from federal listing, an action that would have affected land management across some 170 million acres in the West.

Conservationists would also like to pursue a collaborative approach for another increasingly at-risk species—the monarch butterfly.

The eastern population of monarchs migrates between breeding grounds across North America east of the Rocky Mountains and a small, remote wintering area in Mexico. The loss of milkweed and nectar plants throughout much of the U.S. range, as well as climate change and deforestation in Mexican wintering grounds, have caused monarch populations to plunge. Eastern monarch numbers declined by 84 percent from the winter of 1996-1997 to the winter of 2014-2015, according to a recent study published in *Scientific Reports*, and numbers are down more than 90 percent from their peak of nearly one billion butterflies in the mid-1990s. If current trends prevail, the monarch could be headed

toward a listing as endangered, creating a regulatory burden across a wide swath of states.

“If we had additional nongame funds, we would be able to better coordinate the multitudes of [monarch] planning efforts ongoing in the state and the region,” says Kelley Myers, conservation recreation administrator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “We could have more robust population and habitat monitoring, increase the quality and quantity of our prairie



KRISTA SCHYLER



JESS MCGUIRE (GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES)

Dedicated conservation funding can help states protect threatened ecosystems that support species both abundant and rare. In remnant longleaf pine forests in the Southeast, for example, prescribed burning (center) helps remove invasive plants and restore native understory that supports at-risk species such as the gopher tortoise (left) as well as thriving populations of game species, including white-tailed deer and wild turkey (right).

planting resources and deliver additional habitat development on private lands, which is vital for wildlife enhancement in a state like Iowa, where the majority of lands are in private ownership.”

### Birth of a bold idea

Making the case for dedicated federal funding for wildlife is tough, especially in a challenged economy and a political climate charged by a presidential election. “Federal legislators resist ideas like creating a new tax on outdoor gear, such as tents and field guides,” says Edelson.

But a new idea may spell salvation for at-risk species—and it’s a plan that already has bipartisan support. It began in 2014, when the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies created the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America’s Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources. Composed of 26 men and women from outdoor-recreation companies, business interests and conservation groups, NWF among them, the panel explored nearly two dozen potential funding mechanisms. This March, it released its final recommendation, calling it a “21st century solution” to fund “proactive conservation” that would prevent spe-

cies from declining to the point of being listed. And the plan would do this without creating new taxes or other charges to citizens or businesses.

The solution focuses on an existing federal tax paid by oil, mining and other extractive industries for the right to develop resources on federally administered public lands and waters. This tax amounts to more than \$10 billion every year that the federal government channels into its general fund. The panel is asking Congress to dedicate up to \$1.3 billion of this money annually into the existing and currently unfunded Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program—a potential boon for wildlife management across the nation.

This proposed funding mechanism would allow the states to cover about 75 percent of the costs of implementing their mandated wildlife action plans. The funds would also be a permanent authorization, not subject to the annual federal budget process.

“The new income would be like a transfusion for anemic agency budgets,” says Edelson. In New Hampshire, for example, the entire non-game program squeaks by on about \$1.4 million



DALLAS PAUL GRIMES (GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES)

annually, an amount that would jump to \$12 million under the panel's plan. "With this funding," Kanter says, "we could scale up protection to a level that meets the need rather than chasing after species that have already gone too far down."

### Winners and ... winners

Keeping species off the endangered list is one of the Blue Ribbon Panel's main goals, benefiting both wildlife and businesses. "It's better for business and makes far more sense to work on species before they are endangered," says Jim Martin, former conservation director for the Berkley Conservation Institute, a branch of Pure Fishing, the world's largest fishing-tackle company.

Protecting nongame animals also is a boon to hunters and anglers. "Listing species means we're not maintaining habitats sustainably," Martin says, a factor that harms game and nongame alike. Blue Ribbon Panelist Rebecca Humphries, chief conservation officer for the National Turkey Federation, agrees. She notes that oak-savanna habitat is "perfect for wild turkeys," a popular game species, but the health of this habitat depends on nongame species, from the ants that break down soil to the butterflies and other insects that pollinate plants. "Habitats would be much more resilient if we could protect more species," Humphries says.

Panelist Connie Parker, a senior executive with Pure Fishing, adds that such broad-based wildlife management also benefits people because it means protecting habitats that deliver "tremendous ecosystem services in the form of water filtration, flood attenuation, remediation of soil erosion, carbon storage, clean air, outdoor recreation opportunities and quality of life for our citizens."

Johnny Morris, founder of outdoor retailer Bass Pro Shops, serves as a co-chair of the Blue Ribbon Panel along with former Wyoming Governor David Freudenthal. "Redirecting revenues from energy and mineral development to state-based conservation is a simple, logical solution," Morris says. "It is now up to our leaders in Congress to move this concept forward."

Persuading Congress to adopt the proposal will likely be a multiyear effort. But if it succeeds, it will be the biggest development in wildlife management in the past 40 years—and may even help revive music in western grasslands. "By acting now," O'Mara says, "we can write the next chapter in the history of American conservation and ensure that future generations inherit the full diversity of our nation's fish and wildlife." **W**

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