

FOR THE BIRDS



From habitat loss to climate change, birds face a host of perennial and unprecedented challenges. The Nature Conservancy works from the Atlantic to the Appalachians to protect and restore critical bird habitat, while advancing scientific understanding of conservation needs around the globe.

Recovery of Endangered Bird Reaches New Milestone

This spring, investments in the recovery of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and its iconic forest habitat paid off in a new milestone. A young breeding pair from TNC's Piney Grove Preserve became the first to nest at the adjacent Big Woods Wildlife Management Area.

In May, Dr. Bryan Watts made a house call to the new nest at Big Woods. Watts, director of the Center for Conservation Biology at William & Mary, climbed nearly four stories to retrieve

the six-day-old chicks from their nest cavity to be weighed, measured and banded.

“Banding those birds was a real-life fulfillment of the movie maxim ‘If you build it, they will come,’” says Brian van Eerden, director of TNC’s Virginia Pinelands program. Getting to this point required major investments in property and in people. In 2006, TNC and The Conservation Fund acquired 218,000 acres across 10 Southern states as part of ambitious ongoing efforts to restore longleaf pine throughout its historic range. TNC later

transferred almost 4,500 acres of the Virginia portion to the state to create Big Woods, which also includes a state forest.

TNC, the state and other partners pool our resources and collaborate on habitat restoration, especially controlled burns. Repeated burning mimics nature’s construction methods during the many centuries that these now-rare pine savannas and red-cockaded woodpeckers evolved together. See “*Rising from Ashes*” on page 14.



ONLINE: Learn more at [nature.org/rcwsuccess](https://www.nature.org/rcwsuccess)



THIS PAGE Dr. Bryan Watts, director of the Center for Conservation Biology at William & Mary, climbs toward a new red-cockaded woodpecker nest at Big Woods Wildlife Management Area. © Robert B. Clontz/TNC; **OPPOSITE PAGE** American oyster-catcher in flight © Michiel Oversteegen/TNC Photo Contest 2019



BY THE NUMBERS

2.9 Billion



Drop in continental U.S. and Canada bird populations since 1970, signaling urgent need for investments in “more holistic” conservation.

Source: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, September 2019





CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT TNC's Alex Wilke holds a freshly banded American oystercatcher chick. © Alex Novak/TNC; Virginia Tech research team deploys net for shorebird study. © Peter Frank Edwards; Golden-winged warbler © USFWS; Piping plover chicks © Dottie Dowling



When nesting season rolls around ... I'll be scanning our beaches with a mixture of anxiety and hope, always hope.

— Alex Wilke, Virginia Coast Reserve

Coastal Research Guides Global Conservation

For two decades, The Nature Conservancy has monitored nesting oystercatchers and piping plovers to track the breeding success of these key indicator species. Recently, Virginia Tech researchers have been banding plovers on the Eastern Shore and in the Bahamas to help keep tabs on individual birds. In the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian and its devastating toll on the people of the Bahamas, the science and conservation communities remain concerned about ecological consequences that may compound the human tragedy.

In Virginia, where TNC's Virginia Coast Reserve provides critical nesting habitat, ecologist Alex Wilke reflects on the end of the most recent breeding season with concern for Atlantic Coast piping plovers. Plovers spend fall and winter in the Bahamas, so TNC's protected nesting grounds will be a welcome refuge for returning birds. "When nesting season rolls around again next April, I'll be scanning our beaches with a mixture of anxiety and hope, always hope," Wilke says.

Technology now plays an increasing role in monitoring birds, particularly drone and game cameras that enable more comprehensive

coverage with less disturbance. All of this valuable data is leading to a better understanding of these birds and the challenges they face, as well as helping guide range-wide international conservation efforts.



ONLINE: Learn more at [nature.org/vcr](https://www.nature.org/vcr)

A Win for Warblers

"Golden-winged warblers have declined sharply and now have one of the smallest populations of any bird not on the endangered species list," according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. A century ago, these colorful songbirds thrived in Appalachian valleys where a habitat mosaic offered shrubs and brush for nesting and foraging, and forests for shelter from predators.

Nesting habitat, in particular, has dwindled due to land conversion for agriculture and to fire suppression. This year, TNC and the U.S. Forest Service's highly successful burn season in the Allegheny Highlands expanded onto private lands on the Cowpasture River along with repeat sites at Mare Run and Hidden Valley in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. This work aims to boost prime nesting habitat for golden-winged warblers in their western Virginia stronghold.