



# A cartography of hope

Never averse to mighty challenges, the BirdLife Americas Partnership has just catalogued nearly 2,500 Important Bird Areas across the Americas. But as James Lowen explores the story behind the production of *Important Bird Areas Americas*, he discovers that the real work is only just beginning.



Crimson Topaz is one of the largest species of hummingbird and is found in the mid to upper storey of tropical lowland forests (Pete Morris; Birdquest)



Never judge a book by its cover, runs the adage. But pick up a copy of BirdLife International's soon to be published *Important Bird Areas Americas*, and the jacket imagery speaks volumes. A globe showcases the outline of the huge New World land masses, and the surrounding oceans juxtapose images of globally threatened birds—from Trinidad Piping-guan *Pipile pipile* to Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii*—with pictures of people, from grinning Ecuadorian children to assiduous Colombian fishers. Flapping through the skies above this Earth of diversity is a flyway of long-winged birds heading into the white clouds of an uncertain future. The stylised birds might be terns—or perhaps macaws. It doesn't seem to matter which. Instead, it's their message that counts, and this leaps out from the frontispiece. "IBAs", Peter Johan Schei (Chair, BirdLife Council) observes, "are defined by birds, but their fate will be defined by people."

The Americas Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme is a prodigious contribution towards defining this fate, and the Important Bird Areas 'Directory' its most ambitious output. In a region that contains 57 countries and territories, covers 40 million km<sup>2</sup> and stretches from the Arctic to the fringes of the Antarctic, the logistics involved in identifying globally important conservation sites simply beggar belief. Those with long memories ascribe the Programme's genesis to the first-ever BirdLife world conference, held in Germany in 1994. Here, the fledgling BirdLife Partnership affirmed its global commitment to the IBA concept that had already been rolled out in Europe and the Middle East. IBA directories have followed for Africa (2001), Asia (2004) and now the Americas.

The intervening decade-and-a-half was packed with work, workers and workshops. "Seventy implementing organisations and BirdLife's Americas Secretariat have worked flat out for several years", says David Díaz

Fernández (the Secretariat's IBA Conservation Officer and Directory Co-Editor). National initiatives were the first to start, kicking off in 1995 (United States), with Canada, Mexico and Panama following one year later. The first IBAs identified tended to be well-known, flagship sites such as Long Point in Canada (1996), and Mindo Ecuador and San Rafael in Paraguay (1997). By 2001, the Programme was active in half of the region's countries and territories. Eight years, one sub-regional and (so far) 19 national directories, 29,000 records of 1,800 species that trigger IBA criteria, 30 key regional workshops, hundreds of national events and 3,000 participants later, the Programme is covering the other half too. Partners, where present, ran national IBA processes and in countries without, the BirdLife Secretariat led operations with key NGOs and government bodies.

Understandably, such a Herculean undertaking was not bereft of complications and crises. BirdLife Secretariat staff and national coordinators alike faced the technical and political challenges of processing IBA data from thousands of candidate sites, ensuring that the standardised global criteria were applied consistently from Canada to Chile, and managing the expectations of Partners and fieldworkers. "We were always walking the tightrope between quality and timeliness," recalls Christian Devenish, the Directory's lead Editor.

Fortunately, however, the sheer scale of the results clearly justifies the immense effort. For Marco Lambertini, BirdLife Chief Executive, the Americas IBA Directory is "probably the most comprehensive inventory of key sites for biodiversity in the western hemisphere". The snapshot of the natural world provided by the IBA analysis offers breathtaking insights and fascinating contrasts.

The Directory identifies 2,342 IBAs of global



importance, and the final count is expected to top 2,500 following completion of processes in the United States, Mexico, Guyana and Chile. Together, IBAs cover 7.9% of the Americas' land area (a similar proportion to IBAs in Asia and Africa), a figure that may rise to 10% once the whole region has been assessed. IBAs cover just 49 hectares of Barbados, yet almost 94 million hectares in Brazil. These two countries also host the smallest IBA (Barbados: less than 1 hectare) and the largest (Brazil: 7.3 million hectares). Nearly four in ten IBAs lie outside protected areas, indicating a critical need for a coordinated conservation effort. Territories such as Bermuda have just a single IBA, yet Canada tops the list at 325. While marine IBAs have yet to be documented systematically, they account for

almost a third of the Caribbean's total IBA area.

This region wide analysis goes well beyond what could be achieved from a suite of separate national IBA processes. It enables BirdLife "to see the big picture and to keep track of where we should be going", says Rob Clay, Senior Conservation Manager in BirdLife's Americas Secretariat and Directory co-Editor. "The Directory is a conservation tool at regional scale. The Americas are an incredibly diverse set of countries and territories, covering hundreds of languages, cultures and ecosystems. But there is also much common ground, both biological and politically."

Migratory birds—and their flyways—illustrate the interconnectedness of a region that extends from the Tundra to Tierra del Fuego. Warblers and

waders nesting in North America head south in autumn, many crossing the Equator to reach their winter grounds. Their breeding season over, cinclodes and canasteros from Patagonia wing their way in the opposite direction, escaping the icy south to winter in milder subtropical climes. To protect such species throughout their life cycle, whole arrays of sites need to be safeguarded. IBAs provide such a suitable network of sites. "If we could look down on these havens from above as the birds themselves do during their astonishing, exhausting migrations," muse Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson (Joint Honorary Presidents of BirdLife's Rare Bird Club), "we'd view them as a cartography of hope."

Christian Devenish clarifies the compass points of this cartography, ascribing three



**ABOVE** Cacao farmers in Serra das Lontras e do Javi, Brazil have implemented a traditional system of cultivation favouring biodiversity conservation (Joaquin Blames)

**BELOW** White-tipped Quetzel *Pharomachus fulgidus* is found across northern South America in tropical and sub-tropical montane forest (Pete Morris; Birdquest)



broad aims to the Directory: “it seeks to communicate priority sites for biodiversity conservation, place key information at the hands of decision-makers, and serve as a portfolio of donor funding opportunities for site-based conservation action.” Sceptics might argue that these lofty goals have little chance of coming to fruition, and that IBAs are largely a theoretical exercise. Reality begs to differ. BirdLife Council member Benjamin Olewine IV, whose family helped finance the Americas initiative, ascribes the IBA Programme’s global success to it being “site-based, science-based and people-based”. David Wege, BirdLife’s Senior Caribbean Programme Manager, expands: “the IBA concept is actively used by governments, international agencies and NGOs worldwide as a priority-driven framework for achieving conservation action.”

Governments in Ecuador and Mexico have afforded official recognition to national IBA networks. In Colombia, Peru and the United States, IBA nomination played an important role in several sites gaining legal protection. Conserving IBAs also conserves other threatened wildlife, so IBAs help integrate other site-based conservation initiatives such as Key Biodiversity Areas and the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Moreover, conservation of the Americas IBA network will assist national governments to meet their commitments under international environmental agreements such the Conventions on Biological Diversity and Migratory Species.

International Donor agencies benefit from the Americas IBA programme in three ways. The Directory’s up-to-date information on the conservation importance of sites facilitates their efforts to mainstream biodiversity into other sectors. Multilateral Development banks have introduced environmental

safeguards to mitigate potential negative impacts of their financing operations. “IBAs”, says Christian Devenish, “are a great tool to guide implementation of these policies”. Importantly, says Amiro Pérez-Leroux (Interim General Manager of BirdLife’s Americas Secretariat), the IBA blueprint for conservation is “helping the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund prioritise its Caribbean conservation investment portfolio”.

The Americas IBA programme is providing substantial benefits to BirdLife Partners, Affiliates and other NGOs. For Andrés Bosso, Chair of the BirdLife Americas Partnership, the programme “has raised the profile of all Partners and shown the Partnership to be robust, visionary and inclusive”. Ian Davidson (Executive Director of Nature Canada, BirdLife co-Partner, and formerly Americas Regional Director for BirdLife) argues that IBAs “provide a framework for a targeted on-the-ground approach to bird conservation”. The benefits of such a framework has been recognised by US Fish and Wildlife Service, who through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act have funded assessments of the importance of IBAs for the conservation of Neotropical (North American-breeding) migrants throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

SAVEBrasil (BirdLife in Brazil) has used IBAs to improve the efficiency of its conservation activities in the Atlantic Forest, one of the world’s most vulnerable habitats. “Considering the limited funds available for conservation”, says Pedro Devey (Conservation Director), “priority-setting is crucial to define which IBAs need immediate on-the-ground activities to ensure the long-term survival of threatened birds and wider biodiversity”. Ian Davidson thinks Devey is being modest: “SAVEBrasil mobilised technical and financial support to secure protected status for

some of the most imperiled sites in the Americas *and* positioned the organisation as having the capacity to affect real and positive change”.

John Cecil, IBA Programme Director for Audubon (BirdLife in the United States), considers that the IBA programme has greatly benefited the 100-year-old institution: “it has helped unite the organisation and its collaborators, has contributed continuity and focus to our longstanding or new landscape-scale conservation initiatives, and has motivated us to become more outcome-oriented”. Nyls de Pracontal explains that the bird conservation work of Groupe d’Etude et de Protection des Oiseaux en Guyane (GEOG, BirdLife’s IBA collaborator in French Guiana) “is reinforced by the legitimacy and strength of the BirdLife network”.

Collaborations between the private sector and BirdLife Partnership are a key theme of IBAs in the Americas—the to the benefit of both parties. As Jonathan Stacey, BirdLife’s Rio Tinto Programme Manager argues, “many companies are realising that they need guidance on useful tools to avoid negative impacts on biodiversity, as these are not good for business—and that IBAs are one such tool”.

Rio Tinto, a leading mining corporation, is supporting initiatives at IBAs in several countries. Among the pink feathers to its conservation cap is its sponsorship of the High Andean Flamingo Conservation Group’s work on Andean Flamingo *Phoenicoparrus andinus* (Vulnerable). Farther north, TransCanada Corporation is sponsoring the Canadian IBAs Caretakers Network, a nationwide group of volunteer site-guardians. For Mara Kerry, Nature Canada’s Conservation Director, “TransCanada’s support means that there will be eyes and ears on the ground at IBAs to increase awareness and undertake conservation action”. Brian McConaghy of

TransCanada confirms that the Caretaker Network Program “shares TransCanada’s philosophy of building relationships in the communities in which we live and work”.

It is this community focus that is most striking when we cease hovering above the entire region and stoop down to individual sites. As David Díaz Fernández emphasises, “it is not possible to even think about IBA management without taking into account the people who live there”. Ian Davidson agrees: “conservation is really about people, and our challenge is to parlay the enormous capacity and strength of the Partnership and focus this on IBA conservation”.

The early signs are good. At IBAs in several Caribbean countries, Site Support Groups promote conservation and sustainable development, says Verónica Anadon, co-Editor of BirdLife’s IBA directory for the Caribbean, “by addressing local people’s needs while conserving their natural resources”. Activities range from agro-forestry and awareness-raising to the eradication of invasive alien species and establishment of native tree nurseries. In the Dominican Republic, Laura Perdomo and Yvonne Arias of Grupo Jaragua (BirdLife Affiliate) explain how their local liaison groups help communities: “Jaragua Community Volunteers serve as mediators between the various local interest groups, act as a conduit for information-sharing and help resolve conflicts that arise between socio-economic needs and conservation activities”.

Protecting a network of sites is consistent with sustainable development and poverty alleviation agendas because it allows a significant degree of human use of landscapes. In Mexico, Pronatura Sur (BirdLife Affiliate) has worked with residents at several IBAs on sustainable forest management, community-based ecotourism and micro-finance schemes. In El Salvador, more than 100 small



Bird monitoring with mist nests has proven to be a useful environmental education tool for children at Bosque El Imposible IBA (R. Juárez)

#### In the long term, the Americas IBA Programme seeks to:

- provide a basis for the development of national conservation strategies and protected areas programs;
- highlight areas that should be safeguarded through wise land-use planning, national policies and regulations, and grant-giving and lending programs;
- provide a focus for the conservation efforts of civil society;
- highlight sites that are threatened or inadequately protected so that urgent remedial measures can be taken;
- guide the implementation of global conservation conventions and migratory bird agreements.

communities live inside IBAs. “We realised that the only way to have an impact in so many areas was to mobilise potential activists in these communities”, says Oliver Komar, Science Director of SalvaNATURA (BirdLife Affiliate). “Many of these community leaders have now participated in SalvaNATURA’s tailormade capacity-building programme.”

From this hive of activity across the Americas, it is clear that neither IBAs nor the IBA Directory are ends in themselves. Instead, both are tools in BirdLife’s quest to save biodiversity and create a more sustainable future. For Peter Schei, “the challenge now is to use this invaluable document in guiding our decisions on land-use, development and biodiversity protection across a hemisphere”.

Andrés Bosso goes further, elaborating the Americas

Partnership vision: “A decade-and-a-half ago, we could never have dreamed of the environmental agenda that the 50 countries and territories of the Americas share today. Our Partnership’s goal for the next 15 years should be to use IBAs as conservation beacons to double the number of protected areas. The people of the Americas deserve nothing less.”

Americas and the future, people and the Partnership? We have arrived back at that Directory front cover—and our initial judgment, it seems, was spot on.

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Important Bird Areas Americas will be available from mid-October from BirdLife Partner offices throughout the Americas and from [www.nhbs.co.uk](http://www.nhbs.co.uk)