Esprit de Corps: Land and Water for Neotropical Migratory Birds

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) is globally acclaimed for its accomplishments in providing construction expertise for the Army. However, the environmental sector and the public at large often fail to recognize the Corps' role in natural resources conservation. The Corps has a mission to manage fish and wildlife at all its reservoir projects.

Over the past several decades, the Corps constructed more than 450 Civil Works reservoir projects in 43 states encompassing nearly 12 million acres (at normal pool elevations, about one-half is water and the remaining half is associated land). Although these projects were created primarily for commercial navigation, flood control, hydroelectric power generation, and municipal and industrial water supply, conscious efforts to conserve the natural environment benefits resident and migratory wildlife species. Birdwatching and photography are increasingly important activities on Corps projects, which now host more than 500 million recreational visitors annually.

ABOVE: Many Corps projects not only provide numerous recreational opportunities, they also provide important riparian habitats for breeding, migrating, and wintering bird species

LEFT: The Corps of Engineers administers approximately 450 reservoir projects, many of which occur along major migration pathways of neotropical migrants.

Corps projects are relatively small when compared to the land-area administered by other land management agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. However, the majority of these projects are located along the migration routes of neotropical migratory birds, especially in the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys and the Great Plains. Riparian habitats are known to be an important landscape feature for many migrant and resident bird species. Corps projects maintain a wealth of riparian areas adjacent to lakes, streams, and rivers. The total length of riparian shoreline at Corps reservoirs exceeds the length of coastline of the continental United States.

Typical Corps projects conserve critical breeding and migratory stopover habitat.

Dams along major rivers have created habitat clusters or islands that may be very important to several migratory species as resting and feeding areas during spring and fall migration. Furthermore, typical Corps projects protect headwater riparian or wetland ecosystems from human development, conserving critical breeding and migratory stopover habitat.

The Army Corps of Engineers faces great challenges to natural resources management as an increasing human population seeks Corps reservoirs and adjacent lands for recreational opportunities. Participating in the PIF initiative helps the Corps increase its understanding of lands that are significant to migrant and resident bird populations. The U.S. Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station is assisting the Corps in developing strategies to integrate the needs of these species and the goals of PIF into project management plans. Corps Districts are initiating a proactive approach to regional bird conservation efforts by addressing migratory bird habitat needs in many of their project management plans, as well as in mitigation and restoration efforts.

Richard A. Fischer, H. Roger Hamilton, U.S. Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station, 3909 Halls Ferry Rd., Vicksburg, MS 39180-6199, 601-634-3983, fischer@wes.army.mil

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