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The Endangered Species Act: Making Birds Great Again

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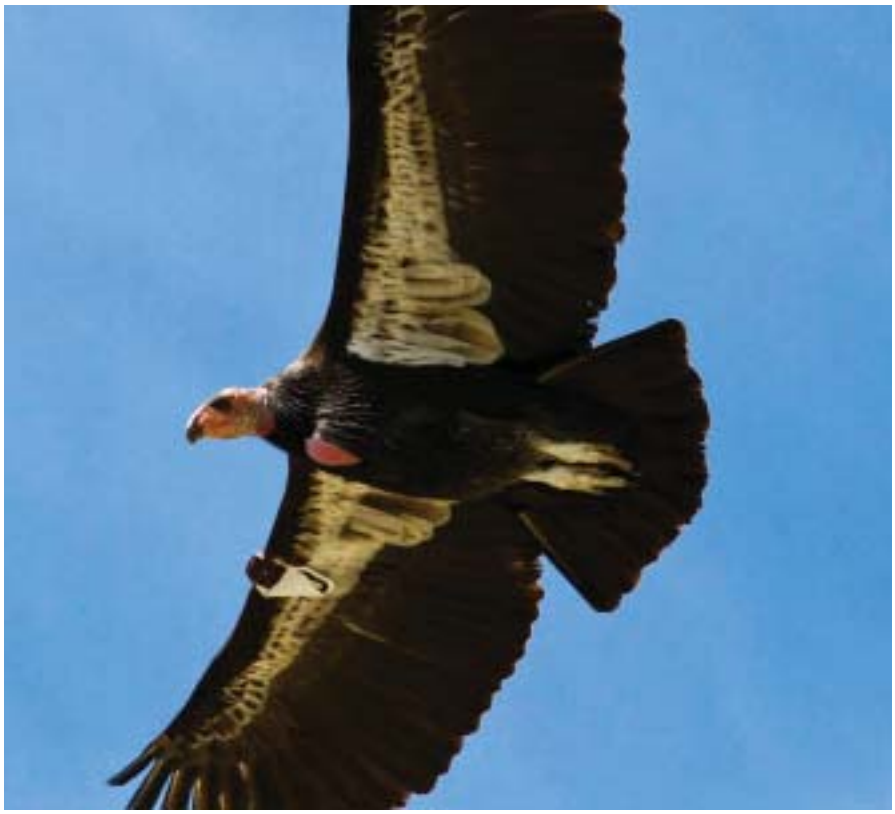
When most people think about the Endangered Species Act, they think about wolves, polar bears or salmon.

Less known is the quiet and remarkable work the Act has done to save so many of America's birds from winging off into extinction.

This week the Center for Biological Diversity released a groundbreaking analysis that found 85 percent of continental U.S. birds protected under the Endangered Species Act increased or stabilized their population sizes since being protected. The average population increase was 624 percent.

It's an extraordinary record of success — and it flies directly in the face of naysayers in Congress who like to complain that the Endangered Species Act is a failure.



Well, tell that to California condors in California and Arizona, whose numbers have increased 391 percent since they were protected in 1968. Tell it to the whooping cranes in the central United States whose population has increased 923 percent since 1967 — or Kirtland's warblers in the Great Lakes, up 1,077 percent since 1971.

That's not to mention California least terns (up 1,835 percent since 1970) or Puerto Rican parrots (up 354 percent since 1967). The list goes on and on.

No matter which way you cut it, there are success stories to tell about birds and the Endangered Species Act all over the country.

Our study is the first ever to examine the year-by-year population size of all 120 bird species protected under the Act. We drew on more than 1,800 scientific population surveys and produced trend graphs for all species whose data are available.

Among our findings is that birds protected under the Act fared much better than unprotected birds, which on average have declined 24 percent since 1974. It's a testament to the importance of actively managing wildlife (common birds generally aren't managed).

We also noted that birds on the endangered species list are recovering at the rate predicted in federal plans — an important finding that counters those who oppose the Act and argue that too few species have been taken off the list. In fact most species haven't been on the protected list long enough to recover. Saving wildlife from extinction takes time, patience and the political will to see it through.

But odds are that, if you live in the continental United States, there's an endangered bird nearby that's benefiting from the Endangered Species Act. (Check out this interactive map.)

Here are just a few highlights:

Red-cockaded woodpecker: When this small, black-capped woodpecker, with a tiny red patch of feathers behind its eyes, was protected as endangered in 1970, widespread destruction of its longleaf pine habitat had decimated its population. Intensive restoration of pine forests, including restoring of a more natural fire regime, has benefited the species, along with dozens of others that depend on longleaf pine.

As a result populations have slowly increased in most of its 39 official recovery units to more than 6,300 individuals across the bird's range.

Atlantic piping plover : These sparrow-sized shorebirds that nest on East Coast shores and spend their winters on Gulf and Caribbean beaches were protected as endangered in 1985 after hunting, trade in feathers for women's hats, and habitat loss had decimated their populations. Protections put in place to reduce predation and manage recreation and development in plover nesting grounds allowed the population to steadily increase from 550 total breeding pairs in the United States in 1986 to more than 1,600 pairs in 2015.

Interior least tern: Before being protected as endangered in 1985, the smallest of the North American terns, which prefers nesting on sandbars in major rivers like the Missouri and Mississippi, had seen its numbers plummet below 2,000 birds due to the spread of invasive plants and unnatural changes to river flows caused by dams. Endangered Species Act protections helped restore more natural river-flow conditions, and the tern's population increased to nearly 14,000 by 2012.

Yellow-shouldered blackbird: By the time this glossy black bird with striking yellow "shoulder" patches was protected as endangered in 1976, forest clearing in Puerto Rico to make room for sugarcane plantations had pushed it to the brink of extinction. The species' downward trend was reversed after artificial nesting-box efforts were initiated to compensate for the loss of large trees, expanding the post-breeding roost count of 272 birds in 1982 to 750 in 2012.

Western Gulf brown pelican: With their population decimated first to provide feathers for women's hats in the 1890s, then by fishermen who feared them as competitors, then by DDT, by 1961 these graceful fliers, known for their dive-bombing fishing tactics, had been extirpated in Louisiana, where they are the state bird, and fast approaching the same status in Texas. After being protected as endangered in 1970, the bird's population in Louisiana and Texas increased from four breeding pairs to more than 16,800 by 2007, and two years later it was declared recovered and delisted.