



Audubon | GREAT LAKES

# Audubon Great Lakes Impact Report

FALL 2023





## Flight Plan

Birds fill us with joy and a profound connection to nature. From the chorus of songbirds in the spring to the midnight hoot of an owl, when birds speak, they remind us to be mindful of our shared planet. But it is when birds are silent that they tell us the most. North America has lost more than 3 billion birds over the past half century and two-thirds of North American birds are at risk of extinction due to climate change. We are reaching a tipping point for birds. But if we act now—in this critical decade—we can reverse this trend. This is what we strive to protect in the Great Lakes region.

United in a common purpose, we have set our ambitions high and identified a role that only Audubon can fill in the conservation community. Three drivers underpin National Audubon Society strategy: taking a hemispheric approach to conservation; tackling climate change; and incorporating equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) throughout our work.

By linking arms with partners and communities throughout the Americas, Audubon will be a force multiplier, ensuring that all partners achieve more together than they ever could alone.

For more than a century, Audubon has demonstrated strength, adaptability, and resilience through periods of change. With the launch of Flight Plan, Audubon's new strategic plan leading us into 2028, we build on the strengths and lessons from our past through:



*In 2023, Audubon Great Lakes' Restoration interns worked to protect vulnerable marsh birds need to thrive on Chicago's southeast side.*

- A measurable Guiding Star to unify the organization in a common direction
- Shared conservation milestones that will drive impact through contributions from the entire Audubon community
- Collaborative co-creation of the plan involving staff, Chapter, and Board engagement
- Incorporating conservation and culture into one plan, acknowledging the need to build internal strengths to achieve our desired impact
- Establishing Audubon's first-ever set of organizational values, and EDIB conservation principles

## Great Lakes Vision

Across the Great Lakes region, we define, execute and support Audubon's conservation objectives, policy goals and activation of more than 300,000 Audubon members and

53 chapters across a five-state area, including Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. We are driven by the principle that where birds thrive, people prosper. Bringing diverse constituencies together, we create practical solutions for people and birds by fostering healthy natural landscapes that can support bird populations while also improving the quality of life for urban, suburban, and rural communities. We use solid science to inform management action and policy that helps coalesce a diverse network to solve these large challenges. With dedicated supporters, we can save birds like the Black Tern, Piping Plover and Least Bittern and improve the quality of life for people in the Great Lakes region.

Our work to protect and restore the Great Lakes and stabilize declining bird populations is our highest conservation priority. We address this by using four proven conservation strategies - leading critical science, restoring and managing habitat, engaging local communities across the region and driving public policy.

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

## Conservation

Holding 20 percent of the world’s fresh water within more than 10,000 miles of shoreline, the Great Lakes are a globally significant ecosystem for birds and people. This year, Audubon Great Lakes continues to make progress on our ambitious vision plan too improve and restore 300,000 acres of high priority Great Lakes coastal habitat.

Audubon has now completed nine wetland restoration and resiliency projects and has 12 active projects that are improving habitat across 20,000 acres. These projects are providing critical coastal habitat, cleaning up lakes and building resiliency to climate change. Audubon has developed landscape-

scale marsh bird and wetland partnerships in 3 of our 12 priority regions – St. Louis River Estuary, Calumet, and West Michigan Coastal Corridor. These partnerships provide the platform to expand wetland protections and restorations based on sound science.

Audubon is building relationships with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe, St. Croix Tribe, Sault Tribes and Oneida Nation involving tribal staff in project planning before and during project onset; increasing engagement, trust and knowledge-sharing. In priority regions where Audubon has empowered its network, built partnerships, and restored wetland habitat across nearly 20,000 acres, we are seeing early signs of bird population stabilization, and even recovery in many species of greatest concern like the Common Gallinule

and Least Bittern.

During our 2023 field season, 17 volunteers monitored 32 wetlands for breeding marsh birds in the Calumet region of Indiana, using data to evaluate the impact of National Fish & Wildlife Foundation’s Sustain Our Great Lakes Program on wetland birds. In Wisconsin, bird monitoring and community engagement is ongoing in our partnership with the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin in Green

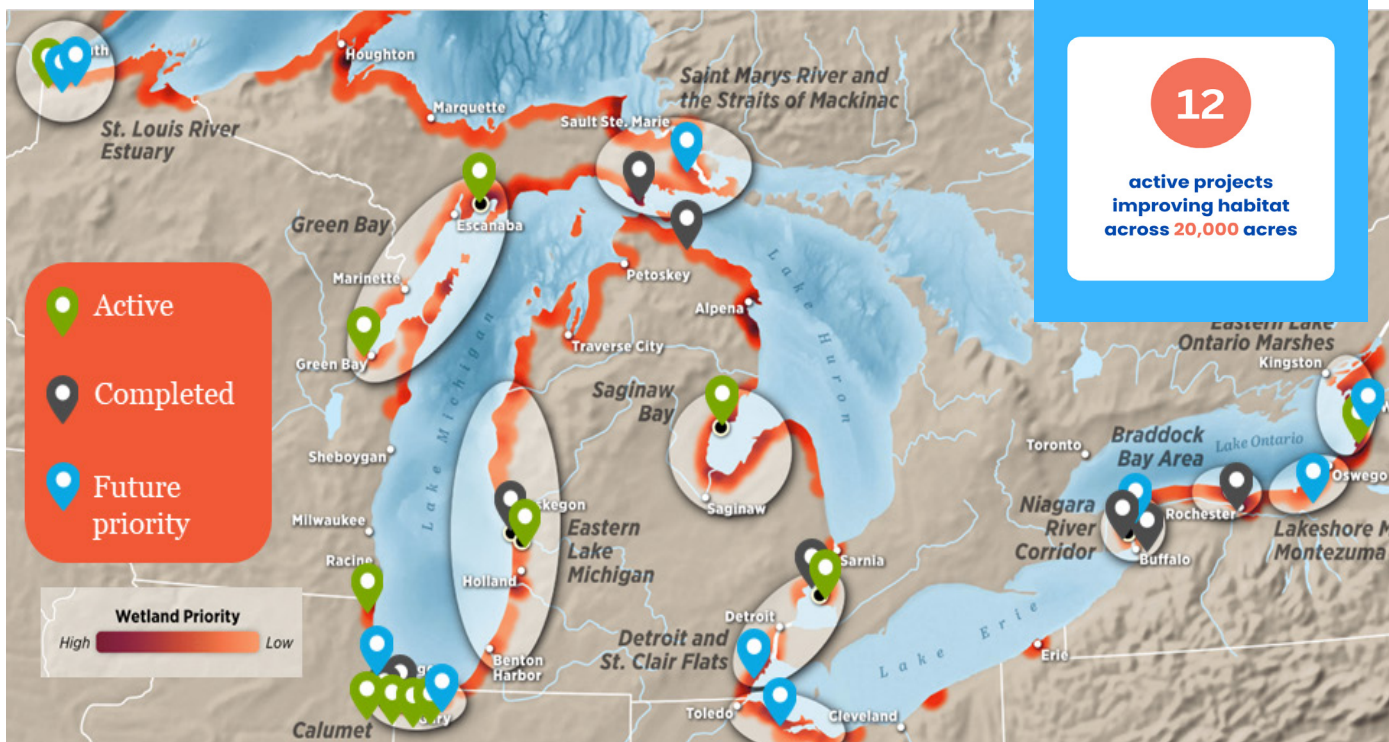
### Conservation Impact

9

**completed wetland restoration & resiliency projects**

12

**active projects improving habitat across 20,000 acres**



Audubon has now completed nine wetland restoration and resiliency projects and have twelve currently active. These projects are providing critical coastal habitat, cleaning up the lakes and building resiliency to climate change.



Bay with 25 volunteers monitoring Piping Plovers at Cat Island, and six volunteers monitoring marsh birds in Allouez Bay. Thirty-nine volunteers monitored for marsh birds and Black Terns across Michigan's four priority areas, and we continued to strengthen our partnerships and increase community engagement across the state.

### Launch of a New Community-driven Climate Project in the Calumet Region

Audubon Great Lakes' science identifies the Calumet region on the southern shore of Lake Michigan as a high priority for restoration. This year, we launched a new climate resilience planning project. Supported by grants from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), we are working with our partners Brown Faces Green Spaces and the Urban League of Northwest Indiana to conduct a community-driven planning effort to restore 300 acres of degraded wetland habitat along the West Branch of the Little Calumet River at Hatcher Park and Marshalltown Marsh in Gary, Indiana. Gary, once the center of the U.S. steel industry, is now home to many degraded wetlands, it faces climate hazards, and is ranked fourth in the nation for worst air quality.

We are working with our partners for a first-of-its-kind, community driven effort to engage community members in Gary to create a long-term vision for Marshalltown and Hatcher Park. Over time, we envision Hatcher Park and Marshalltown Marsh as a gateway to a myriad of habitats and a levee trail connecting over five miles of

prairies, woodlands, and wetlands along the Little Calumet River.

As part of this project, Audubon's Wild Indigo Nature Explorations program, an urban outreach program for communities of color that began over 10 years ago, will host public events at Hatcher Park like bird outings and volunteer plantings of native plants.

### Powderhorn Lake Restoration Project



*Aerial view of Powderhorn Lake project*

Audubon Great Lakes, the Forest Preserves of Cook County, and partners at the Great Lakes Commission, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration recently completed a significant restoration project at Powderhorn Lake Forest Preserve, the most biodiverse area in the city of Chicago. By restoring nearly 200 acres of wetlands and reconnecting Powderhorn Lake to Wolf Lake, we have improved habitats for birds, fish and other wildlife to thrive. Nearly \$1.2 million of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funds were directed to Powderhorn Lake project, which involved installing underground

pipes to reconnect the two lakes, helping to restore wildlife numbers by connecting previously separated habitats. This project also allows for the control of water levels in the area to prevent flooding and make habitat safer for marsh birds. This restoration project stands as a testament to the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies working together to achieve a unique and ambitious goal.

### Protecting the Great Lakes Piping Plover at Cat Island

Across the Great Lakes, Piping Plover monitors are trained to recognize the signs that a nest may be abandoned. When four abandoned eggs were discovered in Long Island, Wisconsin, in the Apostle Islands, they were quickly transported to a captive rearing facility, where the eggs and chicks were cared for. At 28-days old, Audubon Great Lakes helped release the chicks at the Cat Island Restoration Site, in Lower Green Bay with partners U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Detroit Zoo and University of Minnesota. This is the first year the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service has released captive Great Lakes



*Piping plover chick*

Piping Plover chick release



Piping Plovers outside of the state of Michigan — the population's stronghold — and the first time in the state of Wisconsin.

This summer, Audubon also engaged 25 community scientists at Cat Island, with partners U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to monitor nesting Piping Plovers. The Great Lakes Piping Plover Recovery Effort joined Audubon and partners at Cat Island to color band Piping Plover chicks — an essential piece of valuable data collection to better understand bird conservation and migration journeys for these federally endangered species.

This year marked a second record-breaking breeding season for Piping Plovers: 80 pairs nested across the Great Lakes region. We see potential for the Cat Island Plover population

to expand into other areas of suitable habitat and will continue to monitor progress.

### Saving An Iconic Species

Audubon Great Lakes is leading the effort to protect the Black Tern in Michigan, where populations have declined an estimated 99% since 1960. Through partnerships and collaboration, Audubon is learning more about factors driving the decline of the Black Tern and investing in the protection of its breeding grounds.

Each spring, one of the largest breeding colonies of Black Terns arrive to St. Clair Flats State Wildlife Area to nest in wetlands. It's here that Audubon manages a restoration project to improve hemi-marsh conditions and a team of volunteer monitors who venture out to these difficult spaces by canoe or kayak to

### Building the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders: Restoration Interns

**116+** acres of natural areas enhanced or restored

**1,300+** hours of ecological restoration

**500+** hours of field-based trainings & certifications

**150+** pounds of invasive plants/plant material pulled



count Black Tern adults, juveniles, and other secretive marsh birds to measure their response to the restoration.

Data revealed the average number of adult breeding pairs at St. Clair Flats dropped from more than 300 in 2013 to roughly 50 in 2022. Research published in the journal, 'Biological Conservation,' sheds light on new ways to address Black Tern population decline, like expanding conservation efforts to other important areas along their migration route.

In addition to this important research, Audubon's statewide monitoring uncovered a large colony of Black Terns at Tawas Lake, where over 115 adults were nesting. Colonies of this size are of high conservation value, and will be prioritized for future monitoring and management. Audubon Great Lakes will continue to work with partners on this statewide survey effort, while improving habitat at key priority colonies.

ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

## Engagement

### Grange Insurance Audubon Center

In Columbus, Ohio, Grange Insurance Audubon Center is working in Linden, Ohio to address barriers that prevent communities of color from experiencing and enjoying their local natural areas. Grange partnered with the Linden Community Center to provide afterschool and summer camp programming that focused on establishing relationships and building trust while introducing nature-based activities. To date more than 160



Black Tern

students have participated in the programs.

This year, a record 200 households participated in the Center's Native Plan Backyard Challenge in partnership with Columbus Audubon, which encourages homeowners to promote native plantings in their backyard to support our ecosystem in a changing climate.

### Aullwood Audubon Nature Center and Farm

Aullwood Audubon Nature Center and Farm in Dayton, Ohio, welcomed over 80,000 visitors to explore and connect with nature. This year Aullwood served over 20,000 K-12 students from local schools in on-site environmental education field trips and off-site artistic residencies.

The READS After-School program expanded to three local schools with at-risk students and successfully served 60+ students to achieve reading scores to pass their grade while increasing their knowledge and comfort in nature. This year the Center also completed construction of an 800-ft wheelchair-accessible boardwalk in Muskrat Marsh habitat.

### Creating Inclusive Outdoor Spaces

Audubon Great Lakes directly engaged nearly 2,500 community members across six cities through its Wild Indigo Nature Explorations programming, a community engagement program that seeks to build lasting relationships between urban communities of color and their local natural areas.

This year Wild Indigo internships focused on youth leadership and community wellness through nature. This work grew in Milwaukee to include 3 seasonal cohorts, expanded to Chicago for a summer internship program, and piloted ways to support partners working with teens over the summer in Detroit. We broadened

Engaging our communities & networks:

Engaged nearly **2,500** community members across **6** cities

**14,000** Audubon Great Lakes members took action to protect birds

**92** volunteers monitored for marsh birds across **7** priority regions.

and deepened our community partnerships at all Wild Indigo sites and have started collaborating on ways that Wild Indigo can support a broader community of environment leaders.

### Connecting Michiganders to the Public Lands that Birds Rely on

MI Birds, a public outreach and education program created by Audubon Great Lakes and Michigan Department of Natural Resources, deployed ambassadors to organize events like Birds & Brews, lead immersive bird walks, and present webinars -- all with a goal of building environmental stewardship and support for conservation funding in the state. This year, MI Bird ambassadors engaged over 1,000 people.

#### ADVOCACY

## Policy

This year, Audubon Great Lakes was proud to advance policy solutions in support of wetlands, climate change solutions, and conservation funding to protect birds and the places they depend on.

Over the last 9 months, 114 Great Lakes leaders representing 34 chapters participated in monthly policy updates and trainings on increasing member engagement and discussed a range of timely equity, diversity, and inclusion topics.

Some 14,000 Audubon Great Lakes members responded to action alerts, submitted comments, and met with their local elected officials.



We also hosted 4 Birds & Brews events across Wisconsin, Indiana and Michigan, where more than 220 Audubon members heard from environmental and policy experts on the steps we can all take to protect birds.

This year Audubon Great Lakes staff led eight bird walks with State Representatives and State Senators from Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan to discuss the importance of wetlands, the biggest issues affecting local birds, and policy solutions that can provide a lifeline to Great Lakes birds and communities.

In Wisconsin, we worked with Governor Evers and state legislators to include funding for our wetland restoration work with the Oneida Nation in the state budget, successfully allocating \$350 thousand

for that work over the next 2 years. We are also leading on a Senate Bill 222 in Wisconsin, a pre-disaster flood resilience grant program that will provide up to \$2 million to communities to create or restore wetlands as a natural flood mitigation solution. This bill has already passed the WI state senate and funding for this program was included in the recently passed state budget.

In Michigan, we led the effort to secure \$10 million of supplemental funding from the American Rescue plan for wetland restoration, enhancement and acquisitions in the Lake Erie and Saginaw Bay watersheds. We also secured an additional \$2 million for wetland restoration money in the Michigan state budget.

At the close of 2023, we'll have empowered hundreds of advocates across the Great Lakes region to work together for the places birds and people need to thrive.

### Advocating for Wetlands and Climate-friendly Policy at Our Statehouses

Over 30 Audubon members and policy experts met with more than 30 elected officials at Wisconsin Advocacy Day earlier this spring to share the important role that wetlands and climate-friendly policies play in creating more of the places wildlife need to thrive, while making healthier and more resilient communities for people. Another advocacy day held in Indianapolis resulted in over 20 Audubon members and policy experts meeting with over 40 elected officials to share the



*Wisconsin Governor Evers signed the state budget at the State Capitol in Madison, WI. Audubon Great Lakes Freshwater Policy Director, Brian Vigue, and his children were among the group that joined the press conference*

important role that both wetlands and renewable energy play in reducing carbon emissions, contributing to economic growth, and ensuring that birds and people have healthy places to rest and nest.

### Activating Audubon's Network to Protect Indiana's Wetlands

In Indiana, where only 15 percent of the state's historic wetlands remain, we fought hard to get more funding and protections for wetlands across the state.

In January, we gathered Audubon members at the Indiana Statehouse to meet with their representatives to advocate for wetlands protections and solutions to climate change. This day of action kicked off our advocacy in the state, which resulted in two victories for Indiana's birds.

In the spring, we called on Audubon members to send more than 1,800 individual messages urging their legislators to support the largest conservation funding investment of state dollars in thirty years. This advocacy helped ensure that the final budget included an investment of \$10 million in the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust Fund to conserve important natural areas across Indiana.

### Looking Ahead

This year, Audubon Great Lakes mobilized our network across the region in science, policy, and conservation action to make a difference for Great Lakes birds and their communities. While we've made incredible strides, our work is just beginning.

Now is a critical time to enact wetland protections. The U.S. Supreme Court recently issued a decision in *Sackett v. EPA*, which leaves wetlands across the Great Lakes without federal protection. In Indiana alone, it could place as many as 300,000 acres of wetlands at-risk of destruction. We will work to protect wetlands that have been put at risk with our state policy and conservation work.

Birds are already feeling the impacts of our rapidly changing climate. This year we'll continue to work to stabilize declining bird populations by restoring the most important places for birds, and their communities.

Your support allows us to scale up our conservation, policy, and engagement work to protect even more birds. Thank you for your support of Audubon Great Lakes, and your commitment to protecting birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow.

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