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**Connecticut Audubon Society Issues 2008 *Connecticut State of the Birds* Report:
Focuses on Conservation Strategies for Six Bird Species At Risk
To Illustrate Complexities & Challenges of Bird Conservation, Habitat Protection**

Hartford, CT, February 11, 2008 – Connecticut Audubon Society’s (CAS) third annual *Connecticut State of the Birds* report, issued today, describes possible conservation strategies for six bird species that are in serious trouble - - and for which their Connecticut habitat is critical to their global survival -- to illustrate how complex the problems and solutions are related to habitat protection and bird conservation. These include the Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow (a state-listed “species of Special Concern”), the Blue-winged Warbler (a state-listed “Endangered” species) and Golden-winged Warbler, the American Oystercatcher (a state-listed “species of Special Concern”), the Cerulean Warbler and the Bobolink (a state-listed “species of Special Concern”).

Connecticut Audubon Society President Robert Martinez and Senior Director of Science and Conservation Milan Bull presented the report’s major findings, including CAS’s recommendations for urgent conservation actions (“Connecticut Bird and Habitat Conservation Priorities”), at a joint press conference with State Representative Richard Roy and State Senator Edward Meyer (the Chairs of the Environment Committee), and Edward Parker, Bureau Chief of the CT Department of Environmental Protection’s Natural Resources Division. The press conference was held today at 11 a.m. in the Legislative Office Building, Room 1B, in Hartford, CT.

“A common misconception among the general public as well as many environmentalists is that restoring species diversity and conserving wildlife habitat is as simple as buying a piece of land, assuming suitable land is available, and reserving it as a conservation easement or using some other mechanism to permanently prevent development,” said Milan Bull, Editor-in-Chief of *Connecticut State of the Birds*. “However, it is rarely this simple. Most of Connecticut’s threatened bird species require specialized habitats, such as grasslands and shrublands. If these areas are not regularly maintained by mowing, cutting and other practices, they quickly revert to forested land. Even old-growth forests, which provide habitat for different bird species, require ongoing efforts by skilled forest managers to keep them healthy and productive as wildlife habitat. Effective land management practices require substantial investments of both time and money. These commitments need to be carefully considered as part of any habitat protection plan.”

Connecticut’s grasslands, which support bird species like the Bobolink, have shrunk to less than 5% of what they were in 1909. In 2004, the CT DEP listed the Bobolink as a species of Special Concern. (Many other grassland species that require larger tracts of land to nest are faring far worse.) Many smaller hayfields around Connecticut could likely support healthy Bobolink populations. However, farmers would need to delay mowing until the Bobolinks have finished nesting. But hay has the highest value when it is cut earlier in the season. A possible compromise: subsidize farmers to “grow” grassland birds (like Bobolinks) instead of hay and corn, especially in marginal agricultural areas on their farms. This will require payments to farmers to delay haying and possibly converting cornfields on marginal lands to hayfields to create Bobolink habitat. These solutions can be costly to implement and monitor. The largest tract of privately owned grasslands in the state is Connecticut Audubon Society’s 670-acre Bafflin Sanctuary in Pomfret, and CAS is actively managing this Sanctuary as grassland habitat with the help of a CT DEP Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) grant.

“In the case of the Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow,” said Bull, “the solution, if any, is far more complex and may indeed be out of our hands on even a regional level, as global warming increases the tidal range.” Entirely restricted to saltmarshes, up to one half of the world’s population resides at least part of the year in southern New England. The native saltmarsh grasses of Connecticut provide a particularly suitable nesting environment for this sparrow,

and specific saltmarshes between Guilford and Stonington are home to the vast majority of these birds in Connecticut. Surprisingly, their nests are built just above the average high-tide water level and are at risk of destruction from even typical spring tides. Both declining acreage of native saltmarshes and future rising sea levels pose significant threats to the Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow. The *Connecticut State of the Birds 2008* report recommends improved monitoring of the sparrow population and preserving Connecticut's remaining saltmarshes (80% of which have already been lost), especially the higher elevation areas where nesting occurs.

Cerulean Warblers are among the fastest declining of all Connecticut's songbirds: the mature forests they need to breed here are disappearing, and their wintering grounds on the slopes and mountains of northern South America are also in danger. Once a fixture on the eastern shoreline in the summer months, the American Oystercatcher is highly sensitive to human disturbance, and a shrinking population is competing with humans for the use of our beaches during the birds' breeding season. They are also vulnerable to oil spills, hurricanes and other catastrophic events. "Connecticut's shoreline is a very slender and dynamic habitat, highly developed and not easily recreated," notes the report.

"As you will read in our 2008 *Connecticut State of the Birds* report, there are no 'one-size-fits-all' programs or simplistic solutions," said CAS President Robert Martinez. "The next, difficult steps are to design, fund and implement action plans that address the problems we've identified, including changing human behavior, which is probably the most difficult challenge of all. But conservation is a 'global' issue that concerns all of us. Right here, right now, in Connecticut, we can and must do something to protect at-risk bird species and disappearing wildlife habitat and the countless plants, insects and other animals that share these same habitats."

"Nothing contributes more to our state's ecology than birds and I compliment the Connecticut Audubon Society on its initiative," said Senator Edward Meyer, Senate Chair of the Environment Committee.

"The Connecticut Audubon Society is continuing to provide enlightenment to the public, informing them how best to coexist with surrounding wildlife as well as emphasizing the value of Connecticut's natural resources. I am pleased to support them in their continued efforts," said State Senator John McKinney.

Based on the findings of its 2006 and 2007 *Connecticut State of the Birds* reports, which described the effects of habitat loss and human threats on the state's bird populations and habitats, Connecticut Audubon Society also issued the following set of five prioritized recommendations:

Connecticut Bird and Habitat Conservation Priorities

1. Preserve Grasslands
 - Protect existing grasslands from development.
 - Provide farmers with incentives to mow after the nesting season.
 - Provide farmers with incentives to convert marginal cropland to grassland.
 - Key species: Meadowlark, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow.

2. Manage Land to Create More Shrublands
 - Actively manage public land to increase shrublands.
 - Provide incentives to private landowners to create shrublands.
 - Encourage utilities to maintain power line cuts as shrublands.
 - Key Species: Blue-winged Warbler, Brown Thrasher, Towhee.

3. Protecting Remaining Beach and Saltmarsh Habitats
 - Actively prevent degradation of the limited existing habitat.
 - Provide funds for policing during the nesting season.
 - Use dredge spoil to create safe artificial nesting islands.
 - Key species: Oystercatcher, Least Tern, Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

4. Slow Forest Fragmentation and Stop Deer Overbrowsing
 - Use land acquisition to preserve large blocks of unbroken forest.

- Reduce deer populations in impacted forests.
- Key species: Scarlet Tanager, Ovenbird, Wood Thrush.

5. Limit Unnecessary Human Threats

- Eliminate feral cat colonies on public lands.
- Promote light awareness programs for major buildings.
- Establish guidelines for lighting on communications towers.
- Support controls on all invasive species.
- Key species: All migratory and native species.

2008 Connecticut State of the Birds Contributing Authors Are:

>**Chris Elphick** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Connecticut, a co-editor of the *Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*, and writes for the nationally syndicated newspaper column, *Sibley on Birds*.

>**Robert Askins** is Professor of Biology at Connecticut College, where he is Chair of the Biology Department and Director of the Goodwin-Niering Center for Conservation Biology and Environmental Studies.

>**Jenny Dickson** is a wildlife biologist with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and leader of DEP's Wildlife Diversity program. She specializes in songbirds, inland and freshwater wetland birds and small mammals.

>**Patrick Comins** is Audubon Connecticut's Director of Bird Conservation for Connecticut and is Vice President of the Connecticut Ornithological Association.

>**Greg Hanisek** is News Editor at the Republican-American newspaper in Waterbury and writes a twice-weekly nature column. He is also editor of *The Connecticut Warbler* magazine.

Founded in 1898, Connecticut Audubon Society conserves Connecticut's environment through science-based education and advocacy focused on the state's bird populations and their habitats. Connecticut Audubon Society operates nature facilities in Fairfield, Milford, Glastonbury and Pomfret, an EcoTravel office in Essex and an Environmental Advocacy office in Hartford.

Connecticut Audubon Society manages 19 wildlife sanctuaries around the state, preserves over 2,600 acres of open space in Connecticut, and educates over 200,000 children and adults annually. Working exclusively in the state of Connecticut for over 100 years, Connecticut Audubon Society is an independent organization, not affiliated with any national or governmental group. For membership and other information, please visit www.ctaudubon.org.