

IBA in the Spotlight: Laskeek Bay

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Waves crashing. Orca's breaching. Birds calling. These are all sights and sounds experienced by visiting volunteer citizen scientists on Limestone Island in Laskeek Bay Important Bird Area, Haida Gwaii. For three months each summer, volunteers are transported to East Limestone Island and spend a minimum of one week assisting in a camp run by the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society (LBCS). Since 1990, over 550 volunteers have participated – approximately half from local communities and the rest from across Canada and 15 other countries. Local schoolchildren and high school students come to Limestone each year to experience first-hand biological research and gain work experience, and over 20 university students have worked in the camp and undertaken studies on the island.

The key species of interest for the research and monitoring activities in Laskeek Bay is the Ancient Murrelet. The islands of Haida Gwaii are the only place in Canada where Ancient Murrelets nest, with approximately 50% of the global population breeding there. These seabirds connect the



Ancient Murrelet with chick.

waters of the offshore marine environment, where they feed, with the tall trees of the coastal temperate rainforest, under which they nest. Ancient Murrelets are at risk in Canada because of the threat of introduced predators; their populations have been devastated throughout their range in Alaska, Russia and Japan by foxes, rats, racoons and other species. The LBCS undertakes a variety of activities to minimize the impact of introduced predators on Laskeek Bay's murrelets, and monitor the impacts of introduced predators and control efforts.

Laskeek Bay IBA is not only important for Ancient Murrelets. The Society's 15 monitoring programs cover a broad range of the marine birds and mammals, rare plants, and introduced species (black-tailed deer, squirrels, racoons and plants) that live in the area, making Laskeek Bay an exciting place to be a citizen scientist. For more information, to make a donation or to inquire about volunteer opportunities, please visit www.laskeekbay.org.

Alan Moore, Laskeek Bay Conservation Society



Checking Cassin's Auklet nest boxes.

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Websites of Interest

www.ibacanada.ca
www.bcnature.ca
www.birdscanada.org
www.naturecanada.ca
www.birdlife.org



BirdLife
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BIRD AREA



Photo: John Cecil

Almost 30 IBAs in California, Arizona and Utah support Cactus Wren, North America's largest wren species.

"IBAs have the unique power to unite people, communities, and organizations in proactive bird conservation, one place at a time"

- Frank Gill, President Emeritus,
National Audubon Society



Photo: Eric VanderWerf

Red-footed Booby on Lehua Islet, a small, rocky, volcanic island 31 kilometers west of Kauai. Owned by the U.S. Coast Guard and managed by the State of Hawaii as a seabird sanctuary, Lehua is important for the number (up to 25,000 pairs) and diversity of breeding seabirds it supports and for the presence of several seabird species that are rare or have restricted breeding ranges.

Important Bird Areas in the United States

An interesting aspect of participating in a global program is learning about how the program is being implemented in other countries. With nearly 200 countries now participating in the Important Bird Areas program, we have much to learn. Spurred on by John Cecil's (National Audubon Society) IBA presentation to the IBA Canada Committee in April, we thought it would be timely to provide an overview of the United States' IBA program.

Two organizations have been involved with identifying and working towards IBA conservation in the U.S., the American Bird Conservancy and the National Audubon Society, which highlights the attractiveness of the IBA concept in America. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) began its Important Bird Areas Program in 1995 and was the official partner of BirdLife International between 1995 and 1998. ABC conducted a series of state roundtables throughout the U.S., receiving recommendations from hundreds of experts on the avifauna of each state, and asking participants to fill out nomination forms. The focus was on identifying global level IBAs. Approximately 500 IBAs were identified by ABC using this top down approach. As a product of its program, ABC published a book in 2002 on the 500 most Important Bird Areas in the United States. Signs identifying sites as globally Important Bird Areas were distributed by ABC and are posted at more than 350 sites nationwide and ABC continues to conduct IBA education and conservation activities. For more information or to find an IBA designated by ABC, visit www.abcbirds.org.

The National Audubon Society IBA program also began in 1995 with a focus on identifying state-level IBAs.

Audubon supported the ABC process by developing nominations for Global-level IBAs. Audubon then became the BirdLife International U.S. IBA partner in 2000, assuming the role for global IBA identification.

From the start Audubon took a different approach than ABC to identifying IBAs: they applied a state level, bottom up approach, working with their local chapters and state programs. Criteria have now been developed for global, continental, and state levels (but no national level like Canada) and Audubon continues to identify IBAs at all levels. Currently, 424 global and 15 continental IBAs have been identified and it is expected that the number of global sites may double and there could be as many as 1500 continental sites once this initial identification process is complete. Audubon is also working to evaluate IBAs identified by ABC using the Audubon-BirdLife criteria. This will help to ensure the two IBA programs are aligned as much as possible.

In addition to identifying global and continental IBAs, Audubon has identified over 2,000 state-level IBAs across 50 states. Audubon is taking a rigorous approach to defining boundaries using spatial analysis of federal land holdings, protected areas, and habitat and land use. Audubon is also identifying IBAs in the Pacific Ocean adjacent to California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska, using at sea survey data, spatial modeling and spatial statistics.

Identifying Important Bird Areas is only the first in a series of steps towards habitat conservation for birds and biodiversity. The power of the Important Bird Areas network is not fully realized until we know what is happening to these special

The U.S. IBA Program continued...

places and how they are changing over time. This allows us to identify, track, and prioritize developing issues, and adapt conservation planning, implementation and management.

As in Canada, the Audubon IBA program relies heavily on local communities and volunteers for tracking how sites are changing and implementing conservation activities at U.S. IBAs. In Canada, our volunteers are part of a Caretaker Network, while in the U.S., volunteers are part of IBA Adoption Groups. The 270 IBA Adoption Groups that have formed in more than 28 US states are comprised of landowners, individuals or existing organizations. Each Adoption Group conducts activities based on the skills, interests and availability of its members, as well as the conservation needs of the IBA in question. The goal of all groups is to assist the landowner in maintaining or increasing the

IBAs' populations of focal species through a combination of monitoring, restoration, enhancement, education, advocacy, resource management, outreach and/or other activities. As in Canada, IBA Adoption Groups are supported by regional or state-based IBA Coordinators and the National IBA Program. Some recent achievements made by state IBA programs are summarized below.

Looking ahead, Audubon will continue to work towards completing the inventory of all the Important Bird Areas in the U.S. and conducting conservation activities at these sites, through the efforts of state programs and national coordination. For more information about the Audubon IBA program or to learn about specific IBAs, visit www.importantbirdareas.org.

*By Krista Englund, John Cecil
and Karen Barry*

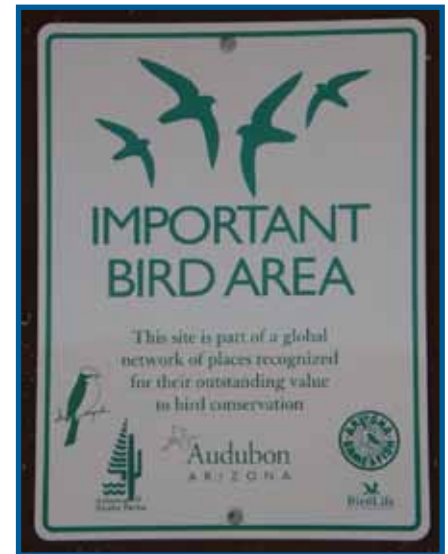


Photo: Bob Handfield

Audubon printed 10,000 IBA signs in 2002. To date approximately 6,600 signs have been distributed and installed at boundaries, entrances and visitor centres in Important Bird Areas throughout the U.S.

State IBA Program Achievements

- Audubon California, with partners, is working to engage private landowners, specifically rice farmers, on innovative conservation practices to help Tricolored Blackbirds at Important Bird Areas such as the Surprise Valley and Tejon Ranch.
- In Connecticut, Madison voters choose to protect lands adjacent to the Hammonasset Beach State Park, a Globally Significant Important Bird Area.
- In Louisiana, the presence of IBAs has been cited by the Army Corps of Engineers as rationale for closing the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a ship channel that contributed to flooding New Orleans and destroyed thousands of acres of wetlands.
- Through Audubon Maryland/DC efforts, IBAs are incorporated into a local planning process, helping to curb sprawl in the county.
- Efforts of Audubon South Carolina have resulted in the expansion of Beidler Forest IBA through three land acquisitions, protecting more than 2,500 acres.
- Efforts by Audubon Minnesota have resulted in an agreement by a developer to deed acreage to a city park and the placing of easements on wetlands and private lands adjacent to an IBA.
- Audubon Missouri partnered with Audubon chapters, the State University, and Missouri Department of Conservation to restore 100-150 acres of habitat within an IBA.
- In Montana, efforts by Five Valleys Audubon Chapter in coordination with Montana Audubon, helped stop proposed development at Clark Fork River - Grass Valley IBA, a continentally significant IBA for Lewis' Woodpecker, and led to conservation easements and new partnerships.
- Efforts in North Carolina have led to IBAs being included in the statewide comprehensive conservation planning tool.
- In Oregon, volunteers were trained in conducting presence surveys for the threatened Marbled Murrelet in Yachats, to raise awareness and to initiate a citizen science monitoring effort at the Marbled Murrelet Important Bird Area.

New Signs for 28 Important Bird Areas in BC

A flood of new signs will be erected in 28 IBA across BC this fall. Two types of signs are being installed: interpretive signs and IBA identification signs (Figure 1), which will increase the profile of IBAs and enhance awareness of birds and conservation amongst visitors.

Two interpretive signs about fish and wildlife habitat values of the Englishman River and Little Qualicum River estuaries will be erected in the Little Qualicum to Nanoose IBA. The signs will mention the IBA, and are being produced with the support of the BC Conservation Foundation and Living Rivers-Georgia Basin.

Interpretive signs for Sidney Channel IBA and English Bay-Burrard Inlet IBA are being funded by the Canadian Wildlife Federation and produced in partnership with Caretakers and the Town of Sidney and Vancouver Parks Board. The signs will profile seabirds like Black Oystercatcher, Barrow's Goldeneye, Surf Scoter, Bufflehead, and Heermann's Gull.

Three interpretive signs for Vaseux Lake IBA, Kilpoola Lake IBA and Osoyoos Oxbow IBA are being produced with funding from the BC Parks Community Legacy Program and will be installed within Vaseux Lake Provincial Park, South Okanagan

Protected Area and Haynes Lease Ecological Reserve. These signs will highlight the numerous species at risk found in the area, including Sage Thrasher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Lewis's Woodpecker, and Flammulated Owl. The majority of the signs will be installed by the end of 2011, so be sure to check them out if you are visiting these IBAs in the future.

Interpretive signs are ideal because they can communicate key messages about birds and conservation to increase visitor interest and respect for birds. However, interpretive signs are expensive and time consuming to produce, and some sites may already have existing interpretive signage about birds or there may not be a suitable high-profile site for such a sign. In these cases, small (12"x18") IBA identification signs are an inexpensive and simple way to make visitors aware that they are entering a site that is particularly important for birds. Such signs (Figure 1) have just recently been produced by the IBA Canada Committee for installation in IBAs across Canada. BC will be receiving 70 signs this fall, which will be installed in 28 IBAs spread across the province, including the Creston Valley, Chilcotin Junction, Stuart-Tachie-Middle Rivers near Ft. St.



Figure 1. IBA Identification Sign

James, on Mitlenatch Island, and at three sites on Haida Gwaii, 10 sites on Vancouver Island, and four sites on the South Coast. BC Nature and IBA Caretakers greatly appreciate the commitment of Nature Canada to providing signs for provincial partners this year. Additional signs may be available in future years, depending on demand and funding availability. Alternatively, the electronic file can be provided by BC Nature and these aluminum signs can be produced for less than \$50 each at many sign shops.

By Krista Englund

QR Codes: Linking Visitors to Online Site Summaries

Some of the interpretive and IBA identification signs being installed this year in BC will feature a new technology called a QR Code (upper left, Figure 1). Developed in Japan, QR Codes are gaining popularity here. Similar to a barcode, QR codes store information (e.g. a calendar event, contact info, a geo location, plain text, a link to a URL) and can be read by a QR Code reader. Anyone with a smart phone or ipad can download a (often free) QR code reader to read these codes. The QR codes on the BC IBA signs contain a link to the Site Summary on the ibacanada.ca website. This is particularly valuable for the IBA identification signs, which contain no information about the specific IBA. Using the QR code, a viewer can easily access the site summary, which contains information about the birds for which the site was designated, as well as conservation threats and efforts. QR codes could be used in other more interactive ways in the future to further engage visitors in IBA conservation.

Seabird Colonies in Strait of Georgia IBAs

Important Bird Areas (IBAs), like all natural areas, are dynamic systems where changes in habitat conditions and other environmental factors can lead to shifts in bird abundance and distribution. While change is often caused by humans, natural fluctuations also occur. This ever-changing landscape creates interesting challenges when implementing conservation initiatives like the Important Bird Areas program, which designates specific sites of importance to birds based on the number of birds using that site.

One situation we are currently considering comes from the Strait of Georgia. Several IBAs designated for breeding colonies of Glaucous-winged Gull, Double-crested Cormorants and Pelagic Cormorants no longer support the species for which they were designated, or no longer support numbers that trigger IBA status. At the same time, new colonies, for cormorants at least, have emerged in other locations within the Strait of Georgia. Other colonial breeding species, like Great Blue Heron, are also known to shift their breeding location in response to changing conditions. As with the cormorants and gulls, herons no longer breed at several BC IBAs originally designated for their Great Blue Heron colonies.

Declines at colonial breeding sites can occur for a number of reasons, such as habitat alteration, increased disturbance or predation, redistribution to other sites where predation risk is less and/or food resources are greater, or a general population decline of that species. One of the authors of this article, Louise Blight, is completing her PhD at UBC studying declining Glaucous-winged Gull populations in the Strait of Georgia. As part of her research she visited gull breeding sites

in 2009 and 2010 to census as many colonies as possible in the region. With the help of colleagues at Parks Canada and the BC Breeding Bird Atlas, she was able to survey 43 of the 76 colonies originally visited a quarter-century before by Canadian Wildlife Service scientists. Another monitoring program led by Trudy Chatwin with the BC Ministry of Environment is collecting valuable yearly data on cormorant breeding colonies in the Strait of Georgia. This data complements observations made by the Caretakers for IBAs in the Strait of Georgia.

According to Louise's work, breeding Glaucous-winged Gulls in the Georgia Basin have dramatically decreased over the last 25 years. Since 1986, the year of the last Basin-wide surveys, no colonies have grown in size. In addition, Mitlenatch Island, one of the biggest colonies in British Columbia and an IBA, now supports only about 50% of its earlier gull population. Population declines near Nanaimo have been the most dramatic. In 1986, about 1600 pairs of Glaucous-winged gulls – 12% of Georgia Basin numbers, and over 2% of the national population – nested on islands in the approaches to Nanaimo Harbour. In 2010, only 32 nests were found at these sites. In this area, the Snake Island IBA was designated for its national significance to breeding Glaucous-winged gulls and Pelagic Cormorants. Louise's surveys of the island, as well as those conducted by Caretaker Bill Merilees, detected very few nesting gulls in recent years and no nesting cormorants in 2010.

Trudy's work shows similar declining trends for breeding cormorants in the Georgia Basin. Surveys of 34 Pelagic and 17 Double-crested Cormorant colonies in 2000 demonstrated that



Glaucous-winged Gull

Photo: Gord Gadsden

“Several IBAs designated for breeding colonies of Glaucous-winged Gull, Double-crested Cormorants and Pelagic Cormorants no longer support the species for which they were designated, or no longer support numbers that trigger IBA status. At the same time, new colonies, for cormorants at least, have emerged in other locations within the Strait of Georgia.”



Double-crested Cormorant colony on Great Chain Island in 1988. Numbers of cormorants breeding at this IBA have decreased dramatically since its peak of 686 pairs in 1990.

Photo: Marilyn Lambert

Continued on next page

Seabird Colonies in Strait of Georgia IBAs continued...

overall counts of Pelagic Cormorants were down by half, and Double-crested Cormorants had declined by two-thirds since 1987. While some of these declines may be due to redistribution, the main cause of decline appears to be Bald Eagle predation, and to a lesser degree, changes in prey availability and human disturbance. Interestingly, some cormorants have shifted their breeding sites to “artificial” habitats. For instance, two Pelagic Cormorant colonies have established under the Burrard and Granville Bridges in Vancouver, and Double-crested Cormorants are nesting on crane structures on Vancouver Island. Some gulls have also turned to urban nesting since about the mid-1900s, with colonies now occurring on rooftops in Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo.

For the IBA program, changes in breeding colonies present an important conservation and management challenge. If an area is set aside to protect significant concentrations of a species, but does not currently meet this goal, should the area’s IBA status be revoked, or is this a sign that restoration of site or species is long overdue? There are no simple answers.

In order to tackle this question we are seeking input from expert scientists like Louise and Trudy, and the National Technical Committee. It is very possible that an abandoned colony could be recolonised in the future provided the habitat and food supply remain suitable, or are restored. One idea being considered is clustering existing and former breeding sites, or sites with suitable

breeding habitat for a certain species, into a single IBA composed of multiple small island components. This is an evolving concept, and our efforts in British Columbia are feeding into a larger-scale approach being developed by BirdLife International as part of a new global push to identify marine IBAs. Caretakers and local scientists can play an important role in this process by continuing to monitor birds during the breeding period so we can track how breeding habits are shifting. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that the IBA program is a strong and vibrant one that effectively identifies and conserves key sites for current and future bird use, in the face of natural and anthropogenic changes.

By Karen Barry, Louise Blight, and Peter Davidson.

Man Walking Across America for IBAs

Brad Storey and his dog Xena are walking across America to raise awareness and support for bird conservation and Important Bird Areas. As a devoted birdwatcher, Brad has spent a lifetime inspiring friends and family to learn about birds and the threats they face due to habitat loss from climate change and development. Brad started his walk this September in Brunswick, Georgia, and will head west to Montgomery, Alabama and continue along the Gulf Coast before heading to California. He and his dog will be stopping at Audubon Centers and Important Bird Areas along the way. Follow their progress on Brad’s Facebook Fanpage: Bird Man Walking and see their latest bird lists and photos from the road, or visit his blog site: <http://birdmanwalking.wordpress.com/>

IBAs in British Columbia are a partnership program of:



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Contact Information for the BC IBA Program

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