

FIELD GUIDE

TO DEVELOPING

PARTNERSHIPS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the recently documented loss of 2.9 billion birds over 50 years in North America, unprecedented and creative partnerships are needed more than ever to advance bird conservation goals. Many bird conservation outcomes align with broader societal goals, such as water quality and human health, creating opportunities for meaningful and productive partnerships that advance goals to benefit birds and people, in coalitions that are

stronger than one community working alone. Developing mutually beneficial partnerships based on common or complementary goals requires commitment, flexibility, and a desire and capacity to listen and understand the needs, values, and challenges of potential partners. This document provides guidance on how to find common goals, effectively reach out to potential partners, and develop lasting relationships that benefit all players.



While opportunities always exist to strengthen partnerships among organizations focused primarily on birds or bird conservation, many untapped opportunities abound to develop partnerships with entities whose primary focus is not bird conservation, or that are less frequently involved in bird conservation.

Successfully achieving bird conservation goals can also result in, or be compatible with:

- improved water quality and/or increased water availability
- improved human health and community well-being through access to nature, a clean environment, or opportunities for outdoor recreation
- resilient landscapes that provide protection from extreme weather events
- productive working lands
- a strong tourism industry, both domestically and internationally
- corporate sustainability

Exploring opportunities based on these goals can open the door to productive partnerships with a diverse group of constituents that can bolster the resources, credibility, and public influence of bird conservation. By exploring local effects and conducting a stakeholder analysis, engaging in opportunities for networking with and learning about organizations whose focus is broader than bird conservation, and researching potential partners, bird conservation organizations can identify entities that might collaborate towards common goals.



When reaching out to a potential partner, it is important to understand their goals, motivations, and values, and to communicate with the partner in ways that resonate with their interests.

When reaching out to potential partners:

- Understand your audience and identify common ground.
- Identify what you bring to the table to benefit the potential partner, and what they can bring that benefits your own goals. Inviting organizations to the table because you need something from them, without clearly identifying the benefits to them, is a common pitfall of partnership development.
- Look for existing connections to provide insight and introductions.
- Consider who will make the most effective liaison with a new partner—the messenger is part of the message.
- Listen, and seek to understand; approaching a potential partner with an open mind can dispel assumptions and identify areas of common ground.
- Speak your partner’s language—both their actual language, and the manner of speaking and words you use to communicate.
- Lead with messaging that resonates with the partner, which may not focus on birds.
- Acknowledge opportunities for misunderstanding or disagreement.



Once you have identified an organization or individual with common goals and made initial contact, **building on these common goals, identifying value to all partners, and developing trust** are key actions to forming and maintaining the new relationship.

When developing positive relationships:

- Be flexible and expect discomfort; approach a partnership with an open mind and a willingness to listen and understand.

- Build personal relationships and provide opportunities for individuals to connect; partnerships between organizations often start as connections between individuals.
- Clearly and honestly state your goals and demonstrate reliability and competence by doing what you say, respecting partners' time, and being organized and efficient.
- Understand the importance of a good leader and a good facilitator; a good leader can set the tone of a partnership, and a strong facilitator ensures everyone is heard.
- Establish a foundation of mutual value, desired outcomes, and ground rules; framing the group's destination and process can help avoid later pitfalls or confusion.

Building relationships across cultures, whether they be across racial, ethnic, religious, or organizational cultures, requires additional open-mindedness and flexibility:

- Work to understand the culture of the organization with which you wish to partner.
- Be careful not to assume that your way is the “right” way.
- Conduct up-front planning to engage people across cultures; this may take longer but can ultimately pay off with a stronger partnership with greater collaboration and buy-in.



The benefits of partnering with private organizations or individuals extend far beyond funding or match requirements; broadening a partnership to include new and different perspectives can yield new ideas, new approaches, increased capacity, and new opportunities. Partnering outside of the bird conservation community can positively benefit public perception of a cause and lend political clout to an issue. Building on broad, common goals with private organizations can help engage a more diverse network and give stronger relevance to an initiative. Different types of private entities bring different opportunities for partnership contributions and may require different approaches.

- **Individuals** can contribute to conservation through on-the-ground action, political influence, land access, data collection, and financial donations. Citizen-science opportunities, training workshops, and existing landowner connections all provide opportunities to connect with individuals.
- **Private associations, organizations, and initiatives**, such as birding groups, zoos, organizations connected to land and land use, forestry associations, cattlemen's and ranching associations, and energy industry associations may share common or complementary goals with bird conservation. Engaging with organizations that focus on historically underrepresented constituencies in the outdoors can provide

valuable perspectives. Management boards or other governing bodies and business-oriented conferences can help connect with organizations that share common overarching goals.

- **The corporate sector** provides many opportunities for effective partnerships, including implementing conservation on corporate-owned lands, engaging employees in conservation action, and securing financial support from corporate contributions. Corporations work to maintain or enhance their reputation with customers and within their communities, so they may appreciate opportunities to promote positive brand recognition. Industry-led roundtables and industry-focused associations can help provide connections to corporations with interest in sustainability or other common goals.
- **Foundations** can serve as important sources of private funding. They often have very specific areas of interest, so ensure that your organization's mission and goals align with those interests when seeking foundation funding.

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Bird conservation is more relevant than ever. The [Science article highlighting the loss of almost 3 billion birds since 1970](#) caught the attention of scientists, journalists, and the public. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, watching birds became more of a household hobby, with interest in backyard birdwatching swelling. For many people, the outdoors became safer than indoors for activities such as socializing, recreating, and exercising, offering an opportunity to promote natural spaces that benefit humans and birds in many different ways.

Developing partnerships, too, is more important than ever. The global human population has more than doubled in the last 50 years, jumping from 3.7 billion in 1970 to 7.8 billion in 2020. Growing human populations and decreasing bird populations are relying on increasingly limited and human-modified natural resources. Changes in social, economic, and political dynamics locally and globally can encourage—and, indeed, require—us to seek new and innovative ways to stay connected to existing partners, and to build more inclusive partnerships. The benefits of conserving natural resources across our planet are tremendous for people and birds. The more we can demonstrate that bird conservation’s goals align with human needs, and the more we can engage a broad diversity of partners to work toward mutually beneficial outcomes, the greater our chance of success. Experiences with global disruptions—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrate that we are adaptable and can advance key priorities even under dramatically changed circumstances. These lessons carry over to building partnerships. There are many ways to look at an issue, and there are many ways to reach a similar goal.

“Partnership” is a broad category of relationships, but in successful partnerships, all entities both give and receive benefit. Identifying, reaching out to, cultivating, and maintaining new partnerships requires a multifaceted approach. Key strategies to apply include the following:

- **Evaluate shared or complementary goals** to identify entities that might benefit from, and provide benefit to, a partnership.
- **Target outreach and relationship-building strategies** based on specific organizations’ interests and common goals.
- **Maintain clear channels of communication**, including around mutual expectations.
- **Build and maintain trust** through consistency, reliability, sincerity, openness, and inclusiveness.

This is a time of great challenge and great opportunity. The future of bird conservation relies on partnerships, and now is the time to seek unprecedented collaborations that advance common goals and benefit birds and people.