

A bald eagle is perched on a dark, weathered branch. The eagle has a white head and neck, a yellow beak, and dark brown feathers on its body and wings. Its yellow talons are visible as it grips the branch. The background is a solid, vibrant blue.

Protecting Our Birds

Federal law provides new hope for many of North America's endangered bird species.

BY DAVID SHAW, FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

● To order a print of this photograph, see page 5.



Wood stork

The brown pelican was recently removed from the endangered list, while the wood stork is still on it.



Brown pelican

To see a list of current endangered bird, animal and plant species, go to www.fws.gov/endangered.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are 90 threatened or endangered birds in the nation. To put that in perspective, officials have recorded about 925 species, which means almost 10 percent of all bird species in our country are slipping toward extinction.

Of course, that statistic isn't actually that simple. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 allows the listing of genetically distinct populations, meaning subspecies also count.

In addition, some are populations endangered only in the U.S., while elsewhere in the world numbers may be strong.

Making the List

The ESA isn't perfect. Getting species on the list when they are truly in danger and removing them when populations recover is no easy task. As a re-

sult, some listed species are recovering to the point of security, while others not listed at all are at greater risk.

Like any major piece of legislation, the ESA is big and cumbersome. But at the same time, it's probably one of the most important pieces of environmental legislation ever passed. Thanks to the protection of the act and associated funding, we have watched iconic American bird species pulled back from the brink of extinction.

HOW CAN YOU HELP? Create a wildlife habitat in your backyard. Log on to www.nwf.org/backyard to learn more.

Our national symbol, the bald eagle, was nearly wiped out by the pesticide DDT, as were the peregrine falcon and the brown pelican. Now, all three are classified as "recovered," though the bald eagle is still listed as threatened in parts of the country.

Another bird that has been helped by the ESA is the California condor. The condor was down to a mere 23 individuals in 1981. Now, after years of captive breeding and wild releases,

ROAD TO RECOVERY. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the spotted owl is currently listed as "threatened" while the red-cockaded woodpecker and golden-cheeked warbler are listed as endangered.

condors are once again breeding successfully in the wild.

Too Little, Too Late

Let's look at one species for which the act could have been important—the ivory-billed woodpecker. The ivory-billed was last undisputedly seen in the U.S. in 1944, nearly 30 years before the act. Had the ESA been enacted, the remaining tracts of mature swamp forests in the Southeast could have been preserved, likely protecting the few remaining birds. But without the legislation, the last piece of forest

known to hold ivory-billeds was cut down.

For many years, it appeared the ivory-billed woodpecker was gone. In 1997, when no confirmed sightings emerged from the species' former range in the U.S. or Cuba, a motion was put forward to declare the ivory-billed woodpecker extinct.

But in 2004 in the Cache River area of Arkansas, someone claimed to have spotted a single ivory-billed woodpecker. A year later, more sightings were reported near the Choctawhatchee River in Florida's panhandle.

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT FACTS

- Enacted in 1973.
- Some 1,321 populations of U.S. plants and animals are listed as endangered or threatened, including 90 birds and 85 mammals.
- There are active recovery plans for 86 percent of listed species.
- Hawaii has 330 listed populations of plants and animals, the most of any state.
- 336 additional species have been proposed for listing.
- 20 species have been removed from the list after recovery.
- Nine species have been declared extinct after listing.



Spotted owl



Red-cockaded woodpecker



Golden-cheeked warbler

A Second Chance

If officials had declared the ivory-billed extinct in 1997, the species would have had no legal protection upon rediscovery. Thanks in part to the ESA, a major effort was begun to protect habitat and determine how many ivory-billeds remained.

This hasn't been without controversy, though. A few prominent biologists have expressed skepticism and even outright doubt about the validity of the sightings. But let's put those doubts aside

for a moment and imagine that the great ivory-billed woodpecker still does exist in the Southern swamps, as I believe it does.

Here we have an opportunity to help a remarkable species resurrect itself. The ESA gives us the legal and financial framework to work toward that end. And if the ivory-billed is indeed gone from the earth, the Endangered Species Act still provides us with hope—the hope that next time we'll have the tools we need to protect our country's wildlife.