

# Important Bird Areas (IBAs) Significant for Waterbirds in Agricultural Landscapes

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The Important Bird Areas Program of BirdLife and Audubon has benefited from the input, commitment, and passion of countless individuals. Important Bird Areas Program staff and volunteers throughout the U.S. and the world deserve significant recognition for their daily effort to conserve the habitats that so many birds and other wildlife depend on.

## **Executive Summary**

The following report, a product of the Waterbirds on Working Lands Project, summarizes the status of the Important Bird Areas Program and particularly the state of waterbird IBAs. The report focuses on three primary topics, the Important Bird Areas Program, Audubon's Important Bird Areas Database, and a review of waterbird IBAs. The last portion of the report reviews the status of waterbird IBAs throughout the U.S. for all waterbird species except seabirds and then drills down to review the status of waterbird IBAs in regions of high-intensity row-crop production, specifically the focal bird conservation regions of the U.S. as defined by the Waterbirds on Working Lands Project. Overall results indicate that for the Important Bird Areas significant to focal waterbird species within the focal region almost a quarter are significant at a global or continental scale indicating the importance of the natural habitat contained within these IBAs to waterbirds. These IBAs exist in a landscape dominated by agriculture, primarily owned by government agencies, which utilize them for conservation, recreation and some extractive purposes. These birds occurring at these IBAs face a multitude of threats the most significant are disturbance related, habitat loss and/or incompatible uses of the land.

## **Introduction**

Galvanized around the exploitation of egrets, herons and other waterbird species, the National Association of Audubon Societies was formed in 1905 (National Audubon Society 2004). From that year to today Audubon has had a keen interest in and focus on the conservation of waterbirds, from the Great Egret to the Atlantic Puffin to the Piping Plover. As Audubon has focused more and more attention on the conservation of specific sites, Important Bird Areas, an appreciation for the significant role the agricultural community plays in managing a large portion of the U.S. landscape has grown. With the knowledge that engaging the agricultural community is essential to ensuring the conservation of many waterbird species and Important Bird Areas, Audubon formed a partnership with the Monsanto Fund in 2003 (National Audubon Society 2003). Focused on identifying conservation strategies that can be employed by agricultural producers for the conservation of waterbirds and their habitats Audubon launched the Waterbirds on Working Lands Project.

The following report summarizes several areas of advancement within the Important Bird Areas Program that are integral elements of the Waterbirds on Working Lands Project. This report highlights the status of the Important Bird Areas Program throughout the U.S. with some background on its origin and international linkages. Central to the Important Bird Areas Program is the identification of sites as Important Bird Areas. To this end, we have included a summary of the Important Bird Areas identification and prioritization process and details on the Global and Continental IBA criteria. In order to manage information about a vast network of sites a centralized database is essential. A description of Audubon's Important Bird Areas database is included along with details on its origins, development, and application. Finally this report goes into a review of the status of Important Bird Areas significant for waterbirds in the U.S. with a particular focus on those sites that are important for waterbirds and occur within the Waterbirds on Working Lands focal area. This report wraps up by drawing connections to reports developed by Audubon in Arkansas, Mississippi and Missouri that are focused on identifying opportunities for conserving the waterbirds and Important Bird Areas significant to waterbirds that occur in the agricultural landscape within those states.