

# Important Bird Areas in Mexico

*An innovative approach*

**U**ntil very recently, conservation actions focusing on birds were scarce and without coordination in Mexico despite the high species diversity and the multiple threats to the survival of many of them. In 1996, the

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program was installed in the country as part of a trilateral project with the United States and Canada within the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The Important Bird Areas Program aims to establish a worldwide network of places considered critical for the long-term conservation of those populations of birds naturally occurring in them. Ideally, each IBA should be sufficiently large to maintain viable populations of focal species. IBAs should be a tool that helps to identify gaps in the system of protected natural areas of the countries, using information that is generated to implement management plans and conservation of natural resources.

The first step of the program in Mexico was to form a network of ornithologists and people interested in promoting bird conservation through cooperation. As a first step, we invited specialists and other interested people to a workshop held in Oaxaca in 1996. In this workshop, 40 specialists representing universities and NGOs identified 170 target areas, using standardized criteria. Afterwards, more people were invited to participate in the process, and by 1997 the list of nominated areas totaled 193.

These areas were revised by a steering committee before including them in a database adapted to the needs of the program. The maps of all the nominated areas, directly drawn by the experts, were digitized by the Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad (CONABIO) into a geographical information system.

In 1998, the program entered a sec-

ond phase in which the country was divided into four independently coordinated regions. Two workshops were organized for each region in order to review the IBAs, and as a result sites were either added or removed following the recommendations of regional experts. For each IBA selected, a technical description was prepared including biological and geographical information, and a list of birds recorded, specifying categories of abundance and seasonal occurrence. The final list included 230 IBAs representing more than 22,000 records of 1,038 species of birds

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(96.3% of the species recorded in Mexico), and 306 species of conservation concern (90.2% of the nationally threatened species and 100% of Mexican birds listed by BirdLife International as having some degree of threat). In 2000, a book compiling this information was published with the sponsorship of numerous organizations (including the American Bird Conservancy and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation), and an electronic version is currently available in the internet hosted by CONABIO ([www.conabio.gob.mx](http://www.conabio.gob.mx)).

Implementing conservation actions in all the AICAS (the Spanish acronym for IBAs) is currently impossible, or at least, impractical. We decided to develop a series of regional criteria for prioritization. In each region, we qualified each area using biological diversity, presence of endemic species and presence of opportunities for conservation (defined as institutional capacity), and a positive attitude of local people towards conservation. Following this procedure, 16 sites were classified as priority areas for bird conservation in Mexico. If we succeed in achieving conservation in all 16 IBAs, we will be conserving 805 species (75% Mexican avifauna), 55% of the globally threatened species, and 81% of the species endemic to Mexico.

Our priority is to preserve at least all the Mexican endemic species and ensure conservation of the Mexican species listed as globally endangered. To this end, we carried out a prioritization exercise based this time on species. We used the list of Mexican endemic birds and the list of globally endangered species. Then we searched for all the areas containing those species in the IBA database, and within this sort of area, and then for the smaller sub-set of them that can include all species. We ended up with 19 additional areas.

The first IBA thus selected was El Carricito del Huichol, an old-growth pine forest representing one of the few remnants of this vegetation type growing in the western coast of Mexico that still preserves its biological integrity. More recently, a second area, Sian Ka'an in the Yucatan Peninsula, was adopted as a sister project developed cooperatively between Panama, Mexico, and Canada. In the near future, four more areas, one in each of the four regions in Mexico, will be targeted to develop the management plans necessary to implement conservation actions.

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