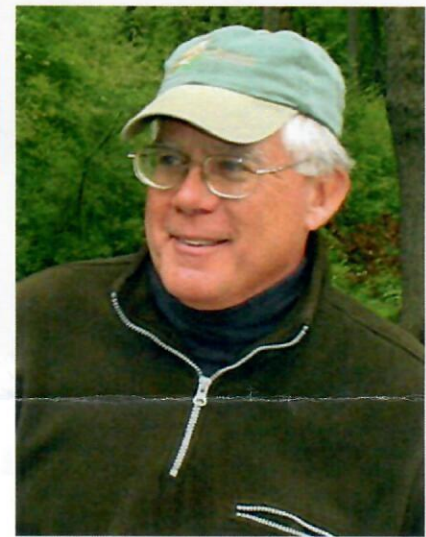




# Habitat Happenings

SAVING BIRDS THRU HABITAT NEWSLETTER

December 2022, Volume 23, Number 1



## Power of one Gary

Gary Siegrist joined our Board of Directors in the summer of 2004 and served through 2012. Everyone who offers to serve on a board gives of his or her time, efforts and treasure, but Gary's was an extra gift as he had to drive 250 miles from his home in Grass River to Omena and back again for every meeting and regularly made the trip without complaint.

He did much more than that. Not long after coming on our Board of Directors he went to work at Dahlem Nature Center in Jackson. While there, he incorporated what he had learned at Saving Birds both at the Dahlem Nature Center in Jackson, Michigan as well as at the thousand plus-acre Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary, bordering the Waterloo Recreation Area. The Sanctuary attracts thousands of migrating Sandhill Cranes every fall. Gary was Sanctuary Manager until relatively recently.

At Dahlem he was land manager for three different properties, totaling 500 acres. There he worked with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to convert a 22-acre crop field to native grasses and wildflowers. He wrote a management plan for the Center's

other lands where 30 acres of wet meadow and prairie were reclaimed from non-native invasive plants. He established a butterfly trail using native plants. He initiated the Birds, Blooms and Butterflies festival, which included a partnership with Wildtype Native Plant Nursery for the sale of native plants to the public.

Gary restored twenty acres of Oak Savana and Black Oak Barrens. He also established a stewardship work crew that continues to this day, and finished restoration efforts with the USFWS to bring back Bogus Lake Fen area along with a contiguous wet meadow.

Along the way, he studied and embraced Dr. Douglas W. Tallamy's teachings about the importance of native plants and the insects they support, which, in turn, support our bird populations.

When Gary sent the above information for an article about his work over nearly two decades, he added:

"Met Kay Charter and had my life changed." Our Executive Director was deeply touch by that remark.

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## Our California trip

Our work on the California Grant began when Trish and I met in San Diego on Sunday, Sept. 25th. There we presented a program for 30 of the 150 Torrey Pines State Natural Area docents. I am scheduled to return next September when all of the docents will be in attendance.

We also visited The Living Coast Discovery Center and Mission Trails Regional Park. We have two events scheduled at the park, and our hope is to include The Living Coast Discovery Center either during my spring visit or one in the fall next year – or, possibly, both. The Living Coast Discovery Center is a hidden gem of a natural area along the saltwater marshes of San Diego Bay just west of the city of Chula Vista, and it illustrates the value and importance of saltwater wetlands. Wetlands are one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet, supporting millions of plants and animals.

From San Diego, Trish and I went to Santa Barbara where I presented another program and was invited to return next

year. Next year's plans are not firm, yet, but I hope to return.

Trish left Santa Barbara for home and I continued on to the Bay Area, where John Timothy, a friend of my neighbor Mike Berst (a dedicated native plants guy), had lined up 5 presentations for adults, and my friend facilitated several school presentations, including Fairfax

High School. The students in the high school were enrolled in an environmental course and were eager to hear my message. After my presentation, two students literally took

me by the hand to a place along a stream where they had conducted a native plant restoration. Unfortunately, a heavy rain destroyed their flower garden. One of the things I hope to accomplish with this grant is to create another larger native plants garden for the school.

I was in the Bay Area for 10 days and had 8 presentations. I plan to return next year.

### San Diego Bay

*The Living Coast Discovery Center is a hidden gem of a natural area along the saltwater marshes.*



*This noisy finch is relatively secretive during the breeding season, yet forms large, gregarious flocks during the winter. It is found during summer mainly in coniferous forests across boreal Canada and in the Rocky Mountains. Its winter movements are both erratic and irruptive, likely due to fluctuating food supply.*

*A few weeks ago an Evening Grosbeak arrived at one of Mike Berst and Kathie Albright's seed feeder. The couple lives about two blocks from our Director.*

## NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

When this year began, I could not have imagined where it would take us, especially regarding the receipt of a generous \$150,000 grant. The grant was designated for use only as conservation education in the western states. Because the grant was limited western states, I opted to focus on California, in areas I know well, with people I also know well. Therefore, this funding will be known as the "California Grant" in future articles.

In late September, our Assistant Director Trish VanDusen and I traveled west to begin work on this grant. We met in San Diego, where we presented a program to the Torrey Pines State Reserve Docents.

Because there were less than 20% of their docents present, we will be revisiting the Reserve next fall when all 130 docents will be attending.

From there, we went to Santa Barbara for a presentation at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden (read more about that in an article in this edition).

The next day, I left for Marin County to present programs for high school students in class, as well as for adults in various venues. Saving Birds' members Claire Ernst and Al Bedecarre generously hosted my stay at their bird-habitat surrounded home.

Claire's sister-in-law, Kaki, is assistant director of Fairfax school. She helped to

schedule a couple of presentations to upper classes there. Since my program features the importance of native plants, the students at Fairfax couldn't wait for the end of my presentation so they could lead me outdoors to show me the work they had already done with native plants. Sadly, a flood washed all their efforts away not long after they completed their work. We plan to underwrite the installation of a new garden with funding from the California Grant.

This will be just one of the projects supported by the California Grant. We will announce other projects as plans are completed.

- Kay Charter

## LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

In the third summer of Covid constraints, Saving Birds Thru Habitat presented a limited schedule of events though last spring we resurrected the Leelanau BirdFest. The festival is two full days of bird watching field trips, with excellent field trip leaders and two high quality evening presentations.

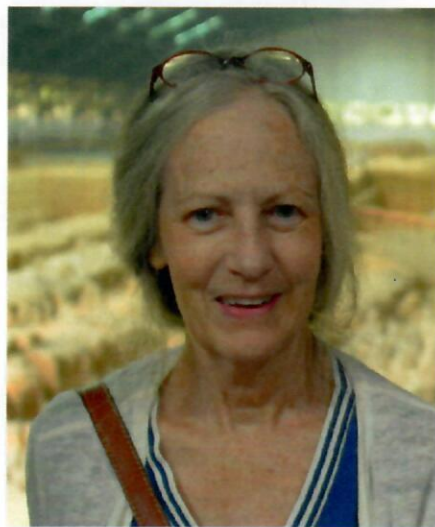
Next spring's event will take place earlier in May, avoiding competitive

events, and will grow accordingly. On-line registration for Leelanau BirdFest 2023 will begin in January. We are excited and looking forward to an even better event this second season.

Kay has been working extra hard to fulfill the programming she planned for the West coast. It is because of her reputation and connections that she was asked to plan the spending of grant funds

that must be spent west of the Rocky Mountains. We applaud her success at taking the native plants message into schools on her first of several trips west. Several other exciting projects are on the horizon that we hope to share with all of you soon.

- Dave Barrons



## Nancy Beekman

I was born and raised in northeastern Ohio and received degrees from the University of Saskatchewan (BA in Psychology), Duke University (M.Ed in Educational Psychology), and The University of Michigan (PhD in Social Work and Psychology). My husband and I have been married for 48 years and have three daughters and eight grandchildren. We built a vacation home in Suttons Bay in 2005 and moved to our home permanently when we both retired in 2016.

The first half of my working life was spent as the Assistant Director of a federal clearinghouse on educational materials. I did abstracting, editing, and supervised other abstractors. I continue to have an interest in such work and volunteer transcribing and editing transcriptions of historical letters and documents for the Library of Congress.

The last twenty years of my career were spent as a clinical social worker on a secure inpatient psychiatric unit in Cincinnati, Ohio, working mostly with geriatric patients on the unit. When I retired, I was the supervisor for all inpatient psychiatric social work at our medical center.

My husband and I enjoy traveling and our trips have emphasized the need for conservation and awareness of our impact on the rest of the world. A few years ago we traveled to Easter Island, considered the most remote civilization in the world given its geographic distance from any other civilization. Walking on a beach on Easter Island, we noticed thousands of tiny blue granules mixed with the sand. They turned out to be bits of plastic from elsewhere in the world. To see our trash washing ashore on this remote little island in the Pacific made us both realize how small and fragile the planet can be. I am looking forward to working with Saving Birds Thru Habitat and working to improve the environment and habitat for all of us.



## Deer Overpopulation Destroys Forest Ecosystems

By Conservation Writer Ted Williams

The 500-acre forest at Lord Creek Farm in Old Lyme, Connecticut, looks beautiful to most visiting hunters, hikers, and horseback riders. A lush carpet of ferns and low Japanese barberry stretches toward Long Island Sound. No under story obstructs the view through the heavily canopied woods. On this fine August morning, all's right with the world — unless you are burdened with knowledge of wildlife ecology, like the two biologists on either side of me.

They are Dr. Scott Williams of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station and Dr. Anthony DeNicola, president and co-founder of White Buffalo, Inc., a nonprofit company dedicated to recovering native ecosystems by culling overpopulated animals — mostly deer.

To Williams and DeNicola, these woods could scarcely look uglier. The barberry (an invasive non-native) and ferns are thriving because deer shun them. The native under story is gone because deer browsed it away. There is no tree regeneration because seedlings are eaten before they're boot-high.

Many hunters in these parts (and in much of the East and Midwest) expect to take clear, 150-yard shots through woods like these because they've never known anything else. But where you can do that, something is dreadfully, drastically wrong. That something is too many deer.

The national mindset that, with wildlife, "more is better" lingers from the early and middle 1900s when more really was better because much of our game had been depleted by market hunting. However, when wildlife is already at carrying capacity, "more" can be a disaster. Among the countless wild creatures hurt by overabundant deer

are the deer themselves. Across wide expanses of their range, whitetails are sickly and scrawny.

Birds suffer as well. The U.S. Forest Service found that when deer exceed 20 per square mile, cerulean warblers, pewees, indigo buntings, least flycatchers, and yellow-billed cuckoos can no longer survive. At 38 deer per square mile, phoebes and even robins disappear. (In his eastern project areas, DeNicola routinely deals with 100 deer per square mile.) Ground nesters, including wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, wood-cock, ovenbirds, and whippoorwills, can nest successfully in ferns. But as adults, these birds need thick cover, so they take a huge hit from predators when deer denude the under story.

Overabundant deer hurt humans, too. Each year, deer-vehicle collisions kill roughly 150 Americans and injure some 10,000 more. In suburbia, deer cause millions of dollars' worth of damage to gardens and ornamental shrubs. Lyme disease (so named because it was discovered in Lyme, Connecticut — just a few miles east of Lord Creek Farm) is now a pandemic in the East and upper Midwest. It is transmitted by black legged ticks, whose abundance varies directly with the abundance of their deer hosts. In fact, evidence suggests that when deer populations are at natural densities, Lyme disease starts to fizzle out. In 2014, there were 33,461 cases of Lyme disease reported across the United States — up from about 1,500 in 1986. But the actual number was no doubt far higher because, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 90 percent of Lyme disease cases go unreported.

At Lord Creek Farm, where Williams and his team have been eradicating barberry and conducting blacklegged-tick research (and deer density is roughly 50 animals per square mile), about

80 percent of the ticks collected from the vegetation carry the Lyme-disease bacteria.

Deer overpopulate because humans have reduced or eliminated their main predators: wolves and cougars. Coyotes, bears, lynx, and bobcats will take fawns and even adult deer when they get the opportunity, but in most areas that doesn't happen often enough to make a difference. In the early 20th century, when eastern forests started to regenerate, deer recovered. Without wolves and cougars to control their numbers and with deer-friendly landscaping available throughout suburban neighborhoods, deer populations exploded far beyond natural, healthy abundance.

In the 1980s, deer denuded the 2,100-acre Crane Estate — a diverse mix of salt marshes, islands, and undeveloped barrier beaches — 30 miles north of Boston. Vegetation loss was so extreme that dunes were blowing away. The property, owned by the Trustees of Reservations, was supposed to be a wildlife refuge. But about the only wildlife left were deer, with skin stretched over their ribs like canvas over Conestoga wagons.

Editorializing on the debacle, the Boston Globe reported this exchange between Bambi and his skunk pal: "Why are you sitting?" Flower asked. "Fawns don't sit." "I'm too weak to stand," said Bambi. "I think I'll just sit here for a few days until I fall over and die." And he did.

When the Trustees proposed a public hunt, it was shouted down by neighbors who eventually affected a modest and inadvertent cull of their own by feeding the starving deer cabbages, squashes, and beet greens, thereby giving them fatal cases of gastroenteritis (deer diarrhea). At this point, the area had the highest incidence of Lyme disease on the planet, and the neighbors — two-thirds of whom were infected — decided that deer hunting wasn't cruel after all. Hunters then reduced the deer population to a healthy, natural level.

There are many areas around the country where overpopulated deer are

endangering public health and destroying native ecosystems, yet residents often oppose effective control. That's where Dr. Anthony DeNicola and White Buffalo, Inc., come in.

The name White Buffalo derives from the belief of Native Americans that the birth of a white buffalo reaffirms their ties with nature. DeNicola co-founded the company in 1996 because he loved wild places and wild things and was horrified at the havoc overpopulated, hoofed mammals — especially white-tailed deer — were wreaking on native plants and animals. "I wanted people to better understand their essential connection to the land, and all that it supports, even if they live in developed environments," DeNicola told me. "When they're in conflict with wildlife, they are forced to deal with that connection, both positive and negative."

Communities hire White Buffalo when deer proliferation clearly poses a danger to humans and the local economy. (Danger to wildlife is a consideration, but generally a lesser one.) White Buffalo then does an assessment and submits a management plan.

The main deer-reduction tools used by White Buffalo are crossbows and .223 rifles. If a community objects to lethal control, the company immobilizes does with tranquilizer darts and surgically sterilizes them. But this is exorbitantly expensive. Contraceptive drugs, also delivered by dart, are ineffective except where deer are essentially confined and tame.

To help with culls, White Buffalo sometimes enlists deer hunters who meet its high selection standards. DeNicola likens these hunters to volunteer firemen. "They recognize the dangers of deer overabundance; they have a particular skill, and they want to help," he says. "We're not looking for great shots. We're looking for fundamentals. We do interviews, background checks, and proficiency tests. A lot of it is just thinking. We have seven deer targets: four we want you to shoot at, three we don't. If you shoot at 40 yards, you're disqualified. If you take a quartering shot (risky in suburbia) or shoot at a fawn accompanied by a doe that is not presenting a shot [thereby teaching the doe to be elusive], you're disqualified. If you come because you like archery and want to shoot your vertical bow [far less accurate than a crossbow], we don't want you."

"Seventy to 80 percent of the hunters who come to our proficiency tests with

firearms and crossbows can't meet the standards," continues DeNicola. "People don't take killing an animal seriously enough. That's why deer hunting in general has such a high crippling rate. We've had five volunteer programs on school grounds and private property, and we've killed over 100 deer with zero [crippling] loss."

Some hunters don't want deer culled (or even scientifically managed) because they imagine that the number of deer is directly proportional to the quality of the hunt and because they don't grasp what too many deer do to people, wildlife, forests, and the deer themselves. In a bizarre twist, these hunters have allied themselves with animal-rights activists who don't want any animal killed by humans for any reason.

I asked DeNicola if all the media attention about Lyme disease and the economic and ecological damage caused by deer overabundance had changed public thinking about culls. "There's literally no change," he replied. "I can go into a new community, and it's like hitting replay for the last 20 years. Exact same dynamic. Hunters aren't happy with what we do. Animal-rights people aren't happy with what we do. It astounds me. It's the same exercise, the same protracted process every time. Either a community has leadership that drives the decision [to cull] or the community flounders. When we finish a project, attitudes are the same as well — people are always astonished by the benefits [of fewer deer]."

These benefits started to become visible across Pennsylvania after Dr. Gary Alt, a renowned black bear biologist, took over the state Game Commission's deer program in 1999. By drastically extending antlerless seasons with increased doe tag allocations so that more does were harvested, he was able to significantly reduce deer numbers and create a more natural buck-doe ratio. Killing just bucks doesn't help much in reducing overabundant deer because you can deplete the buck population by 95 percent, and the 5 percent that survive will impregnate most of the does.

Under Alt's leadership, Pennsylvania made the first real progress in balancing deer to habitat on a state level. Through an intensive education campaign, Alt helped hunters

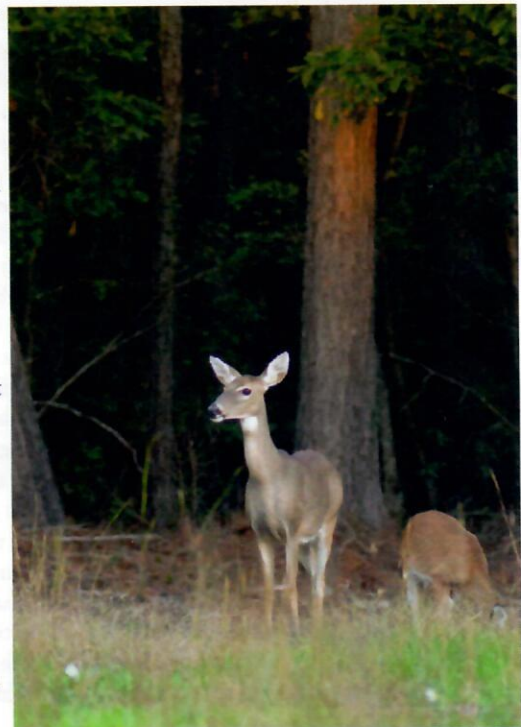
recognize the benefits of scientific deer management.

The Izaak Walton League presented Alt with an Honor Roll Award for his exemplary conservation efforts. The Quality Deer Management Association named him "Professional Deer Manager of the Year." Safari Club International gave him its Conservation Award.

Outdoor Life magazine gave him its Public Service Conservation Award. The Pennsylvania Wildlife Federation gave him its Outstanding Conservation Professional Award and (along with Audubon Pennsylvania) named him Conservation Educator of the Year.

Still, after six years, Alt resigned from the Pennsylvania Game Commission — a decision he attributes to political interference that intimidated his superiors to the point that his team couldn't do its job. "The history of deer management," he told me, "is full of a very small proportion of tenacious, highly motivated hunters driving the system. They oppose antlerless harvest and extended seasons. And they know exactly who to contact." The politicians then hold the agencies hostage, threatening to nix important legislation or license fee increases unless managers cater to the more-is-better crowd.

Williams and DeNicola well know what Alt is talking about. In Redding, Connecticut, they initiated an experiment (funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) to see if balancing deer with habitat could break the Lyme-disease cycle. In two one-



square-mile study areas, they planned to reduce overpopulated, tick-riddled deer to a healthy and natural 8 to 10 animals per square mile, at which point the literature indicated that ticks might peter out for lack of hosts.

But a handful of local hunters calling themselves the Redding Sportsmen's Alliance whipped the community and politicians into a froth of panic and paranoia over a supposed reduction in hunting opportunities. In widely circulated letters, the Alliance falsely charged that White Buffalo and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, both of which had sought and acquired all necessary permits, "have broken a number of state and federal laws in the Town of Redding, and now the public and the state of Connecticut need to hold them accountable." Equally fictitious accusations appeared almost daily on Web sites or in newspaper ads.

After Williams and his team counted 45 deer per square mile from a helicopter flying 20 miles per hour at 200 feet, the Redding Sportsmen's Alliance proclaimed the figure was "mathematically impossible" because some of its members had observed only 2 deer per square mile — from a Cessna flying 120 miles per hour at 500 feet. "One Alliance member," Williams says, "revealed that he put on night-vision goggles and body armor and sat next to the shooting site to 'keep an eye on White Buffalo.' Another was following us around, videotaping. Someone was going to get hurt, so I pulled the plug." Although White Buffalo had removed 87 deer over 3 years, that didn't reduce the population to anywhere near the target of 8 to 10 animals per square mile. All the effort and grant money was wasted.

Hunters who oppose sharpshooting culls in suburbia argue that they can do the job themselves. But White Buffalo is permitted to shoot at night with silencers and infrared thermal-imaging equipment and in crowded neighborhoods — something recreational hunters can't do. And White Buffalo is permitted to set up bait stations, something recreational hunters can rarely do. Multiple studies demonstrate the inefficiency of recreational hunting in suburbia. In a piece Williams and DeNicola co-authored for the Wildlife Society Bulletin and in which they cite some of their own research, they write: "In most cases, hunters have limited access, legal restrictions (i.e., firearm discharge limitations), or may not prefer to see

deer densities reduced below a level of recreational interest. ... Deer subjected to such efforts become educated and may behave differently during removal, and surviving deer may alter behaviors, potentially limiting efficacy of future removal efforts (Williams et al., 2008). There appears to be a threshold where hunters can no longer reduce deer densities because deer become too elusive."

What about the situation outside the suburbs? When I asked DeNicola if there are enough hunters to bring deer into balance with habitat at the county or state levels, he said, "I think there are enough hunters. What it comes down to is the interest in having elevated deer densities. That's the biggest obstacle to effective management. I think hunters have become spoiled over the last several decades, where state agencies were excessively conservative with antlerless permits. There are these 10- or 15-year cycles. The population crashes because of a harsh winter. The state agency gets blamed. Hunters want more deer. The population rebounds. Hunters are happy; they think somehow these densities can be sustained. The population crashes again. The agencies have no clout because there's usually a political body that oversees the biologists. Then the politicians wonder why there's no forest regeneration." He cited Alt's experience in Pennsylvania as "The greatest mistake ever made in wildlife management" is how Alt defines allowing deer to overpopulate to the point they destroy the ecosystem they're part of. For a while, it looked like he would permanently correct that mistake in Pennsylvania. When Alt inherited the deer program, the state had the most unhealthy buck-doe ratio in the United States. Ninety percent of harvested bucks had left their mothers only six months earlier. "We were exterminating them as soon as they grew antlers," Alt says. During his tenure, antlerless harvest was the highest by far in the state's history.

And it began to work. "Even when you start shooting half a million deer a year like we did, it takes a while for that to be measurable on a forest ecosystem," explains Alt. "The numbers are so high you've got to grind them down, and then they have to be down a while before the plants respond. It wasn't until about three years ago that we started to see major improvements. We've got a generation of trees past the deer for the first time in decades."

But the "sad news," Alt says, "is that the Game Commission has been taking more

and more bricks out of the wall. The real killer is that they've pretty much gutted the concurrent buck and doe season [with its heavy emphasis on antlerless harvest]. Even though the bucks-only faction is a tiny percent of the sportsmen, they're effective. They pressure the agency through their legislators."

By no means is the Pennsylvania situation an anomaly. "A lot of states are like that," declares Kip Adams, senior wildlife biologist at the Quality Deer Management Association. "In my 20-plus years as a wildlife biologist, science has never meant less than it does today." Pennsylvania now has the highest number of deer-vehicle collisions in the nation. Some towns are taking matters into their own hands. In an effort to reduce collisions by 50 percent over the next five years, the Pittsburgh suburb of Mt. Lebanon has hired White Buffalo to conduct archery and sharpshooting culls.

The archery cull began September 19 and continued through January. The sharpshooting cull runs from February 1 to March 1.

If you live in an area with too many deer and really want to help wildlife (deer included), get involved at the state level in support of science-based wildlife management. Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper. Attend hearings. Educate your fellow hunters. Urge your fish and wildlife agency to base all management decisions on science provided by the wildlife professionals you and your fellow sportsmen help hire through license fees and the taxes you pay on guns, archery equipment, and ammunition. Stand tall against voices of the past that insist on the failed, dangerous practice of bucks-only harvest.

*Our Executive Director will return to Washington, D. C. in early February to lobby our Congressional Leaders on behalf of birds. There, she will join American Bird Conservancy's Steve Holmer, VP of Policy for the organization.*

*This trip, originally scheduled for spring, 2019, was canceled due to COVID. She is looking forward to returning to urge our leaders to support legislation that benefits our beloved winged creatures.*

# *Saving Birds Thru Habitat*

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