The House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife is taking up H.683

Thank you to all members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife for this opportunity to provide testimony on H. 683. My name is Allan Strong, and I am a Professor of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Vermont in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. I earned a PhD from Tulane University where I studied the winter ecology of two species of migratory birds that breed in the US and winter in the Caribbean. I currently serve as the Chair of Vermont's Endangered Species Committee and as vice-chair of the state's Scientific Advisory Group on Birds. I am a fellow of the American Ornithological Society and I served on the Vermont Birds Record Committee for 15 years. My research addresses factors that affect habitat quality for migratory birds, mostly focused in Vermont and my teaching focuses on wildlife ecology, management, and conservation.

I come before you to speak in support H. 683, "An act relating to prohibiting incidental take of migratory birds." As you have heard from earlier testimony, the federal government has made a policy decision that eliminates any criminal penalties for violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act if those violations (or takings) are incidental to the normal operations associated with the activity. I support H. 683 because it would restore those protections that have been diminished by the federal government.

Although my credentials speak to an academic life, I entered this professional field through a childhood love of birds. I grew up fascinated by bird migration and realizing the amazing diversity of our avian world. Since coming to UVM, I have enjoyed many trips in the field with the Vermont birding community. I lead annual field trips on Lake Champlain by boat, looking for some of our more unusual species of migratory birds that use this important flyway. I have taken many birders to the Northeast Kingdom to search for our special warblers, thrushes, and our unique "boreal grand slam:" the Boreal Chickadee, Canada Jay, Spruce Grouse, and Black-backed Woodpecker. I have organized special counts for species of special concern, trying to get a better handle on populations of some of our declining species. I have spent hundreds of hours counting migratory waterbirds from the shores of Lake Champlain, trying to develop a better understanding of the species that use our state's vast resources.

Vermont supports a diverse array of bird species. Just over 200 species of birds nest in Vermont, and 387 species of birds have been recorded within Vermont's borders. Birds are popular with the residents of the state and as noted in the bill, Vermonters are exceptionally passionate about wildlife watching, birds in particular. The Vermont birding community is particularly close-knit, with over 2,000 members on the Vermont Birds facebook group and this community makes important contributions to citizen science. In 2019, 2,600 people contributed >47,000 checklists to eBird, the citizen science database for assessing changes in bird abundance and distribution.

Although we have some species of birds that are faring well in our human-dominated landscape, many are in decline. Because birds are both popular and relatively easy to detect and identify, we have the luxury of having three incredible sources of data to look at population declines over time. Nationally, the USGS's Breeding Bird Survey uses a vast volunteer network to collect abundance data on 4,100 survey routes across North America during the summer breeding season. During the Christmas Bird Count, about 80,000 volunteers count birds in over 2,500 count locations to assess trends in wintering bird populations. In Vermont, we have the Breeding Bird Atlas – an assessment of the distribution of the state's breeding birds. We now have two snapshots at 25 year intervals to enable us to understand how birds are faring in our own backyard.

One of the challenges with these data sources is that they only give us relative trends in bird populations. So, for example we can tell with certainty that a population has shown a 20% population decline in the last 25 years, but we don't have a good handle on absolute numbers. However, last year, a remarkable study that aggregated these datasets and many more was used to estimate the absolute loss of bird numbers over the last 48 years. Their results were astonishing, and showed that the net loss was 3 billion birds, or 29% of the bird abundance in 1970. In Vermont, we take pride in our forested landscape, but their results show that the eastern forests have lost over 167 million individuals, with over 63% of the species found in this ecosystem showing declines.

We know that the declines of bird populations are caused by a variety of factors. Habitat loss and fragmentation, new diseases, direct and indirect effects of climate change, and introduced predators and competitors. As such, it is hard to pin the population declines on one single cause. However, we do know that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was critical in halting massive overharvest of many species – a number of which, such as herons and egrets, are ones that are no longer considered "game" species. Consequently, the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act put an end to a critical threat to our nation's bird populations. New federal policy undermines the Act's ability to fully enact protections for our bird populations and I applaud Vermont's lawmaker's actions to counteract this short-sighted federal policy change.