

Patrick Phillips

Testimony to the House Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife Committee

January 21, 2020

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Good afternoon and thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify before this committee.

My name is Patrick Phillips and I live in Colchester, Vermont. I am here today as a member of the board of the Green Mountain Audubon Society. We represent just one chapter of Audubon Vermont and are comprised of over a thousand members hailing from Franklin, Grand Isle, and Chittenden Counties. Our membership, on average, is somewhat north of the age of 50, educated, politically astute and, in many cases, politically active. We are a cross-section of Vermont's demographic similar to the cross-section represented by members of the legislature. Just like yourselves, we include carpenters, students, health workers, engineers, retirees, educators, landscapers, police dispatchers, doctors, food-service workers, and a work in myriad of other occupations. I myself spent almost 40 years in education as a biology teacher, assistant principal, and principal.

I think that it is fair to say that our members, like all Audubon members, and like yourselves (by being on this committee), truly appreciate the culture, traditions, and natural beauty of our state. Indeed, this is the reason that we all (regardless of political affiliation) are here - to do our best to ensure that the legacy we leave to our children, grandchildren, and all the generations to follow, is one in which they can thrive amidst Vermont's natural beauty. One only has to consider what we know regarding environmental threats, as described by the testimony that you have heard today, to understand that this legacy is in jeopardy. Members of the Green Mountain Audubon Society have witnessed first-hand the diminishment of key indicator bird specie populations here in Vermont and elsewhere. We have expressed our desire to reverse the current pattern of loss through active engagement in conservation efforts, monetarily supporting conservation efforts of others, and through the promotion of political actions to responsibly address those related issues that are most urgent.

At a time when the threats presented to birds by climate change, habitat loss, and employment of lethal pesticides necessitate greater vigilance on our parts, appointees at the US Department of Interior have removed some protections through what they have termed a "technical clarification" of the more than century old Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This change eliminates the need for any consideration of detrimental effects on avian species on the part of any entity initiating environmental changes.

Here in our state, wildlife also face other challenges to their well-being as a result of Department of Interior actions. Last week, another Audubon board member and I met with the manager of the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge in Swanton at a meeting of the Friends of Missisquoi citizens group. There we learned that budgetary reductions from the US Fish and Wildlife Service have resulted in loss of staff, to the extent that they can no longer support summer interns to remove invasive species that negatively impact bird habitat. This is just another example, and certainly not the only one, of stresses facing migratory species here in Vermont.

The Green Mountain Audubon Society fully supports House Bill 683 as it would provide at least one important measure of protection desperately needed to close the loophole created by the abrogation of a key tenet of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by the Department of the Interior.

Birding enthusiasts frequently travel to and around Vermont to witness the annual migration of thousands of Snow Geese as they land at Dead Creek in Addison, to search for Snowy Owls in these cold winter months, to see boreal species such as the Canada Jay, the Spruce Grouse, and White-winged Crossbill at Moose Bog and the Victory Basin in the Northeast Kingdom. Others climb our tallest peaks to hear the calls of declining populations of Bicknell's Thrush, ply the waters of Lake Champlain searching for jaegers and rare gulls, or seek out occasional visitors like the White Pelican, the Painted Bunting, Say's Phoebe, and the Northern Hawk Owl.

These folks, from both in and out of Vermont, help to support local economies through the purchase of food, fuel, lodging, services, and other goods. But equally as important as their financial impact is the fact they share their love for the diversity of life and the natural beauty that makes Vermont special. We want both those economic and conservation benefits to our state and its wildlife to continue. Positive action on this bill is a step in the right direction.

To quote famed author, ecologist, and conservationist, Aldo Leopold,

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

House Bill 683 is a “right thing” and members of the Green Mountain Audubon Society fully support you in your efforts to move this bill forward.

Thank you for your time and your service to our beautiful state.