

# NEWS RELEASE

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## **POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS FOR REGION-WIDE BIRD CONSERVATION PROMOTED IN MONTH-LONG FESTIVAL**

**San Juan, Puerto Rico, April 22nd 2010** – Celebrating and promoting partnerships for regional bird conservation. This is the focus of the 9th annual Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival (CEBF), lead by the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB)[1]. The Society, the largest organization devoted to wildlife conservation in the Caribbean, will coordinate month-long Caribbean-wide activities beginning today Earth Day 22 April, through to International Biodiversity Day on 22 May, in more than twenty countries [2]. The highly successful program that attracts some 80,000 participants and volunteers each year, this year aims to celebrate the important role that partnerships—local, regional and global—have played in bird conservation success stories.

“Partnerships are essential to securing the survival of the Caribbean’s unique bird life,” said Dr. Lisa Sorenson [3], President of the SCSCB at a launch of the month-long activities. Dr. Sorenson noted that although the Caribbean is recognized as one of the richest areas on the planet for biodiversity, especially birds—some 150 bird species are only found on Caribbean islands—an unsettling 56 of these species are globally threatened with extinction, due to destruction of habitat for development, pollution, mining, and other unsustainable uses [4]. In addition, some birds are threatened with poaching or capture for the pet trade. “Conservation organizations, government agencies, educators, and individuals have shown that they can make a real difference when they work together,” commented Dr. Sorenson, “we have many inspiring stories of successful bird conservation collaborations.”

One such success story is that of the West Indian Whistling-Duck (WIWD), a long-legged duck known for its mystic whistling call and unusual habit of perching in trees. Numbers of this threatened regionally-endemic species had declined to less than 10,000 birds and it had disappeared from some of its former range due to wetland habitat loss and unregulated hunting and poaching. In recent years, however, the duck has undergone a resurgence in numbers, thanks to the hard work of local and regional partners that have worked together to save the species. This charismatic duck has been the flagship of a regional program—the WIWD and Wetlands Conservation Project, run by the SCSCB, that focuses on raising knowledge and awareness about the value of local wetlands and the plight of the duck.

“As a result of our efforts, hunting has declined dramatically on many islands,” said Sorenson, “and for the first time ever, the species has been discovered breeding in Guadeloupe, which is an extension of its range.” Conservationists with the Environmental Awareness Group in Antigua worked together with educators, hunters, and local residents and through monitoring, have been able to document a steady increase in the number of whistling-ducks on Antigua over the last 8 years. “As the population has grown, birds are apparently dispersing to nearby Guadeloupe and have begun settling and breeding there,” said Sorenson. “This conservation success is a cause for celebration and reason for hope for other threatened species.”

Another notable regional success story is the White-crowned Pigeon. This handsome, popular game bird had suffered from severe over-hunting and poaching, as well as loss of forest habitat and disturbance on its breeding cays. In response, conservation organizations (local, regional and international) worked together to study, monitor, and introduce science-based management programs. The Bahamas National Trust, for example, partnered with the US-based National Audubon Society and US Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct research on the bird's feeding, nesting, and migration ecology. They also introduced bag limits and shifted the hunting season so as not to coincide with breeding. Through its White-crowned Pigeon Working Group the SCSCB has worked to promote coordinated conservation and monitoring efforts across the region. As a result of these efforts populations have increased significantly.

Eric Carey, Executive Director of the Bahamas National Trust commented, "The success of White-crowned Pigeon conservation has shown us that cooperation and collaboration at all levels is key to effective wildlife and conservation management." He added, "Many birds migrate or move between our respective territories, they do not recognize political borders. It is therefore critical that we work together to protect and conserve these species."

Sheylda Díaz-Méndez, Regional Coordinator of the CEBF noted that similar partnerships throughout the Caribbean have helped conserve many threatened species, such as the Grenada Dove, Montserrat Oriole, Hispaniolan Parrot, and Ridgeway's Hawk, to name a few. Díaz-Méndez invited each Caribbean country to use the festival theme as an opportunity to highlight their own conservation success stories, as well as congratulate the usually unrecognized and under-appreciated organizations, institutions, and individuals that have worked together to produce remarkable conservation programs in support of the region's exceptionally rich and threatened bird life.

"We need to let our citizens know about this great work and the amazing dedication of Caribbean people involved in wildlife conservation!" Díaz-Méndez remarked noting that many have labored entirely as unpaid volunteers, following their convictions and dedication to Caribbean biodiversity conservation. Díaz-Méndez said that we must find ways to more effectively educate the public about the region's collective unique natural heritage as a critical step towards bring Caribbean wildlife conservation into the wider consciousness of more Caribbean nationals.

The purpose of the month-long Festival over its 9-year history has been to increase public awareness of the region's exceptionally rich and threatened bird life, using the Caribbean's celebrated endemic birds as flagships of conservation. Festival activities include a diverse array of public events including bird-watching excursions, lectures, seminars, photographic exhibitions, school-based art and costume competitions, church services, media campaigns, and theatrical productions all in recognition of the region's rich bird life, natural heritage, and interconnectedness of regional habitats to global events. After a humble beginning, the festival has grown to consistently include in excess of 80,000 participants in recent years. The Festival has been described as an unprecedented initiative of regional unification for heightening environmental education and awareness by leading international conservation organizations.

To view reports and photos of past Caribbean Endemic Bird Festivals, for downloadable Festival resources, and for updates on ongoing and planned activities, kindly visit the Festival website under the “Programs” link at: [www.scscb.org](http://www.scscb.org).

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**For more information, and to arrange an interview, please contact:**

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**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

**1. The Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB)** is the largest single regional organization devoted to wildlife conservation in the Caribbean. It is a non-profit organization whose goals are to promote the scientific study and conservation of Caribbean birds and their habitats, and to promote greater public awareness of the bird life of the region. For more details, see: <http://www.scscb.org>. To learn more about the festival, click on “Programs” and “Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival.”

**2. Countries taking part include:** Antigua, Anguilla, The Bahamas, Bermuda, Bonaire, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Martinique, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Martin, Saint Andre (Columbia), St. Croix (US Virgin Islands), and Trinidad and Tobago. The initiative is supported across the region by a variety of organizations including schools, churches, environmental NGOs, government conservation departments, private sector organizations, universities, and concerned groups and individuals.

**3. Lisa Sorenson** is also Coordinator of the West Indian Whistling-Duck and Wetlands Conservation Project of the SCSCB, a public education and awareness programme on the importance and value of the regions wetlands and birds. Sorenson, an ecologist and conservation biologist, has been working in the Caribbean for 25 years.

**4. BirdLife International** data show that 56 species of birds found in the Caribbean are at risk of global extinction, 11 of them are in danger of imminent extinction. More information, including background information on all of the Caribbean's threatened bird species, can be found at: [www.birdlife.org/datazone/search/species\\_search.html](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/search/species_search.html)