

5Q

WITH
TAMMY
VERCAUTEREN

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies Executive Director



In 2021, CFO partnered with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (Bird Conservancy) to help with two exciting projects that aim to conserve Colorado's grassland birds. CFO launched the Colorado Birding Challenge and raised over \$35,000 to construct the first digital tracking (MOTUS) station in Colorado and contribute to grassland restoration projects Bird Conservancy is conducting in northern Mexico. Colorado Birds spoke with Tammy VerCauteren about the partnership between CFO and Bird Conservancy and how these conservation projects are proceeding.

CB: Remind our readers about Bird Conservancy's grassland birds initiatives and how that relates to the Chihuahuan Desert in northern Mexico.

TV: We employ an integrated approach using science, education and land stewardship to actively address declines in grassland bird populations. We've also spearheaded a tri-national effort to create a sustainable roadmap for the future of our grasslands across the Central Flyway, from Canada to Mexico, which overlaps the geography where we work.

Bird Conservancy recently restored the habitat surrounding our headquarters at Barr Lake State Park, planting blue grama grass and other native plants. This not only supports birds and other wildlife, but also provides educational opportunities to the public, including the youth summer camps we operate that encourage children to explore nature and engage in the outdoor world.

For decades, we've worked to enhance grassland habitat on private land, improving hundreds of thousands of acres through grazing management plans and grassland restoration efforts. In addition, we recently expanded our Integrated Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions (IMBCR) program, the second largest breeding bird monitoring program in North America. The program is now integrated with our habitat restoration work in Mexico, allowing us to monitor grassland bird populations throughout their annual life cycle. This data informs where we work, where we'll place future biologists, and guides our conservation actions on the ground.

Finally, we've been working for the past 18 months to spearhead a collaborative grassland conservation effort, called the Central Grassland Roadmap, that extends from Canada to Mexico. Our grassland birds

are imperiled, and we need to work collaboratively and more strategically to change the trajectories of our wildlife, people and landscapes to ensure our future. Healthy grasslands are part of our natural and cultural heritage. They support our streams and aquifers; provide clean air, food and fiber and are critical for the health and sustainability of both human and wildlife communities. Hundreds of people from the Roadmap community will convene in 2022 to prioritize and coordinate actions to improve the plight of our grasslands. Working together, we can promote grassland health on private, public and tribal lands across our three countries, reversing the dramatic declines in grassland bird populations while also ensuring access to clean air, clean water and clean food for future generations.

CB: To highlight the importance of grassroots fundraising, talk about how the money CFO donated helped unlock federal and state grants.

TV: The money we received from CFO is essential in the conservation equation. These funds unlock matching dollars from federal, state and private foundation sources. Funders want to see dollars leveraged and their investments stretched. They also want to see that others are committed and invested. Every non-federal dollar we raise is matched at least 2 to 1, so the \$35,000 donation from CFO will generate \$70,000 or more that will fund the installation of MOTUS towers and associated conservation work.

CB: The MOTUS technology sounds promising. Explain how that works and what work lies ahead for Colorado and the western region.

TV: The MOTUS towers build on our current efforts to understand grassland bird populations and fill in knowledge gaps along their migration routes. The data will help us pinpoint critical breeding, wintering and stopover habitats. We'll also gain insight into the links between the breeding and non-breeding grounds from the great plains to the Chihuahuan desert. Importantly, the towers will be located on both public and private land, providing an unprecedented picture defining grassland birds' habitat needs for breeding and migration.

We are working with partners to build out a network of at least 100 MOTUS towers from Canada through Mexico. We expect to have at least half the network built out by 2023. Simultaneously, our field efforts are outfitting grassland bird species including Baird's

Sparrow, Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Sprague's Pipit with specialized transmitters that can be detected whenever the birds pass within 10 miles of a MOTUS station.

This is a huge step up for us. In the past, banded birds needed to be recaptured for us to generate a single data point. With the MOTUS technology, each bird we band will potentially generate dozens of data points through space and time during the life of the tag without the need for it to ever be recaptured. As more towers are put on the land, more data on bird locations will be shared, which in turn will inform us where to focus our future conservation efforts to counteract negative population trends.

CB: What progress has been made and what do you see as the biggest challenges that remain?

TV: MOTUS towers are challenging to install in the field. We have a team coordinating the effort with partners to identify priorities for placement on the landscape using multiple data sources as we build out the network. Each site is unique and it takes a talented staff to adapt to the situation, set the guy wires, pour cement and ensure they weather the elements. To do this, we have to rent lifts and have a trailer stocked with materials with us to ensure we're prepared for all contingencies. Funding is a challenge. It's a Catch-22 as partners/funders want to see data and results, yet to generate the data, we need to reach a critical mass of MOTUS towers and birds fitted with transmitters. It's a balancing act and we're fortunate to have several funding partners—like Colorado Field Ornithologists—as “early adopters.” But more is needed before we have enough data to analyze grassland bird behavior and direct conservation strategy.

CB: Of the 34 grassland bird species in Colorado, all, or nearly all, are experiencing moderate to severe population declines due to habitat loss and other ongoing factors. Looking into your crystal ball, are you optimistic that these efforts will make a difference?

TV: I am optimistic. I've dedicated the last 22 years to working for Bird Conservancy because I truly believe that to affect change it takes science, knowledge and understanding to motivate people to work together. People have contributed to the challenges we face in our grasslands, but people are also the solution!

In my talks with landowners, I've seen their passion and commitment to the land. When we have honest conversations and listen to their goals and desires,

they also want to learn more about the lives of birds and understand the importance of their property to bird conservation. These conversations are critical to empowering people to work together.

My optimism also gets a boost every time I see the kids at our camps. Environmental awareness and a love of nature is key to a sustainable future. All of us need to have access to, feel welcome in and have a personal connection to our natural world. Healthy land and healthy people go together, and Bird Conservancy is working to be a part of that equation and contribute in a positive way.

We need innovation and creativity. We need to take risks. Above all, we must recognize that only together can we make lasting change. The birds are counting on us.

5Q is a Colorado Birds interview series that aims to engage CFO members with individuals and organizations affecting birds and birding throughout Colorado. Have a topic you would like us to cover? Know someone we might be interested in interviewing? Send your thoughts to editor@cobirds.org.



Connecting People, Birds and Land

