

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY: CONSERVATION INSTITUTION-BUILDING IS DIFFICULT AND UNPREDICTABLE

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ABSTRACT

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The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) was founded in 1995 after years of complicated negotiations among 50 organizations affiliated with the International Council for Bird Preservation, now BirdLife International. Today it is a great success, but at crucial points in its genesis the enterprise was close to failure. ABC never became, as originally intended, the US partner of BirdLife International. Yet it fills the niche for an entity whose focus is bird conservation in the Americas. ABC's success is an example of the importance of goodwill and persistence by the founders of any conservation organization. Fledgling organizations will always face governance and financial challenges. Entrenched interests, including financial competitors, will often be an obstacle, and founders need to be flexible in how they accomplish their goals.

Key words: American Bird Conservancy, bird conservation, BirdLife International, conservation in the Americas, conservation leadership, establishing a new conservation organization, International Council for Bird Preservation

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has become a vigorous and effective bird conservation organization based in the United States, operating with annual revenues of over US\$12 million and with more than 70 employees (American Bird Conservancy 2016). Creating ABC involved complicated negotiations over several years among scores of individuals and organizations, among them the Pacific Seabird Group, the Colonial Waterbird Society (now Waterbird Society), and Point Reyes Bird Observatory (now Point Blue Conservation Science). It was difficult and illustrates why so many prospective institutions fail at an early stage. Yet goodwill, together with persistence, paid off. Its founding is an important development for bird conservation in the Americas and shows how a new conservation institution can ultimately turn out well, although not fulfilling every original objective of its founders. ABC and its staff, including Gerald W. Winegrad (ABC Vice President of Policy, 1995–2008) and Hannahrose Nevins (current ABC Seabird Program Director), have been active in solving seabird conservation problems, often as partners with other organizations such as the Pacific Seabird Group. Some of ABC's most important seabird conservation achievements are the following:

- Reducing Black-footed *Phoebastria nigripes* and Laysan Albatross *Ph. immutabilis* bycatch in multiple US longline fisheries by implementing US fishery regulations;

- Persuading the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization to adopt an International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries;
- Protecting the world's largest Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* breeding colony (East Sand Island) in the Columbia River estuary;
- Protecting Laysan Albatross chicks on Midway Atoll by persuading the US Fish and Wildlife Service to remove lead paint from deteriorating military buildings, as the young albatross were ingesting the paint and dying as a result;
- Promoting predator controls on islands to protect colonies of Scripp's Murrelets *Synthliboramphus scrippsi* on Anacapa Island, California, and numerous seabird species on Kiska Island, Alaska, and on Mexican islands off Baja California;
- Stopping predator removal programs at mid-Columbia River dams and hatcheries that targeted gulls *Larus* spp., Caspian Terns, and Double-crested Cormorants *Phalacrocorax auritus*;
- Improving timber management to protect Marbled Murrelets *Brachyramphus marmoratus*;
- Reducing Waved Albatross *Ph. irrorata* bycatch in Ecuador and Peru;
- Protecting nesting habitat of Pink-footed Shearwaters *Ardenna creatopus* in Chile and Hawaiian Petrels *Pterodroma sandwichensis* on Kauai, Hawaii;
- Establishing a potential new colony of Newell's Shearwaters *Puffinus newelli* and Hawaiian Petrels on Kauai;

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- Removing sheep and cats that harm Townsend's Shearwaters *Pu. auricularis* on Socorro Island, Mexico;
- Developing information to protect nesting areas of Ringed Storm Petrels *Oceanodroma hornbyi* in Peru and Markham's Storm Petrels *Hydrobates markhami* in Chile;
- Improving population estimates for Pink-footed Shearwaters and DeFilippi's Petrels *Pt. defilippiana* on the Pacific coast of South America; and
- Developing a "Seabird Bycatch Solutions for Fishery Sustainability" training manual.

This article covers the history of ABC only to when it became a fully operational entity, i.e., the establishment phase. There are two other stories worth telling: first, the very difficult period which immediately followed, with constant financial problems, when deep differences developed between ABC and BirdLife International; and second, the outstanding success and exponential growth in budget, staff, and scope of important conservation projects that was achieved thereafter (American Bird Conservancy 2016). But these stories are for another day and may be best told by others. In the meantime, this article concentrates on ABC's genesis. Three of the key individuals who guided ABC's birth have died—James Lynch (a biological ecologist with the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center and chairman of the International Council for Bird Preservation [ICBP] Pan American Continental Section), Donal C. O'Brien, Jr. (a partner at the Milbank Tweed law firm in New York), and Howard Pyle Brokaw (a retired executive of E.I. DuPont de Nemours Company, who began a second career in bird conservation when he retired in the 1970s). We have been in contact with the three other surviving founding directors—Gerard A. Bertrand (then-president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society), Gonzalo Castro de la Mata (Peruvian founder and then chief executive officer of Wetlands for the Americas), and Mercedes S. Foster (then US Geological Service Curator in Birds at the Smithsonian Institution). Here we preserve the history of ABC's creation.

ABC's roots are deeply embedded in the ICBP, which was established in London, United Kingdom, in 1922 and initially staffed by a single volunteer. The idea of ICBP was to bring together bird-conservation-minded organizations from throughout the world to coordinate efforts and to undertake some joint projects. National sections of ICBP, each of which was itself an umbrella organization of like-minded groups, were created in a variety of countries. By the late 1980s, ICBP employed a small professional staff, based in Cambridge, United Kingdom, and was carrying out high-quality conservation work. Its President (O'Brien), Treasurer (Brokaw), and a member of its Council (Bertrand) were from the United States. The staff director of what became known as the ICBP Secretariat, Christoph Imboden, was from Switzerland, and its second-in-command, Michael Rands, was from the United Kingdom.

The US Section of ICBP was incorporated in New York in 1964 by the legendary Roger Tory Peterson, with Dean Amadon, Eugene Eisenmann, Richard Pough, and Milton Erlanger. The ICBP Pan American Continental Section (PACS), which focused on Latin American conservation projects, was incorporated in Washington, DC, in 1981 by 28 prominent ornithologists, including S. Dillon Ripley, Thomas Lovejoy, Robert Ridgely, and William Belton. ICBP Inc., a third affiliate that was founded in 1987, raised funds in the United States for the work of the Secretariat in Cambridge. By

the late 1980s, many of the individuals in leadership positions in the US Section of ICBP and the PACS wanted to enhance their abilities to shape conservation policy and undertake projects globally by increasing ICBP's capacity in the United States, including hiring full-time professional staff.

By then, the US Section of ICBP had evolved to become an active umbrella organization of about 50 diverse groups with interests in bird conservation. Among these were the American Ornithologists' Union, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, The Nature Conservancy, the National Audubon Society, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association, Massachusetts Audubon Society, Pacific Seabird Group, and World Wildlife Fund-US. The limited budget of the US Section of ICBP allowed it to employ only a few individuals (at various times: George Schillinger, Ron Naveen, Kimberly Young, Cecilia Landa, and Anne Di Rosa), who worked to influence bird conservation policy in the US Congress as well as at government agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Forest Service. The 50 constituent organizations met two or three times each year to exchange information about bird conservation issues and to provide direction to staff.

PACS was composed of individual—not institutional—members, including several who were employed at the Smithsonian Institution and other government agencies, universities, and various conservation organizations. All PACS board members (at various times including William Belton, Pablo Canevari, Brian Harrington, and Robert Ridgely) had extensive experience carrying out bird conservation and research projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, and many were Latin American nationals. The primary focus of PACS was to provide small grants and other support to projects on the ground, rather than to influence policies. This was possible thanks to an endowment of around US\$530,000, carefully managed under the leadership of its long-time chairman William Belton that was very efficient because there was no overhead in making grants. In this manner, PACS was one of the very few reliable sources of small grants to support bird conservation in Latin America.

MILESTONES

Genesis of the American Bird Conservancy

By the late 1980s, it was apparent that the structures and governance outlined above were limiting the effectiveness and growth of ICBP internationally and of the US Section of ICBP and ICBP PACS. Although the entities were useful in coordinating and promoting actions, the structure made it difficult to formulate comprehensive policy positions and to raise funds for either international or national activities. At the international level, in 1990 at ICBP's World Conference in New Zealand, the Council decided to re-establish its organizational structure as composed of single primary partners in each country (rather than amorphous groupings of organizations within country sections), with an internationally elected chairman and treasurer, and an appointed council representing regional groupings of partners. The first president and treasurer were O'Brien and Stephen Eccles (a UK citizen resident in the United States), respectively. Because there was no partner organization in the United States at the time, the ICBP invited Cynthia Lenhart to join its Council until a suitable organization became available. At its 1993 World Conference, ICBP decided to change its name to BirdLife International. Imboden was immediately appointed as its first chief executive officer (CEO), and followed by Rands, then Marco Lambertini (from Italy, today

CEO of WWF International), and currently Patricia Zurita (from Ecuador, but based in the United States).

The ICBP Council had anticipated in the early 1990s that the US partner for the newly reorganized ICBP would be the National Audubon Society. ICBP approached that organization, which O'Brien had previously led as chairman of its board of directors. However, its then-President Peter Berle and then-Chairman Ed Woodsum declined the offer. Under the leadership of Berle and his predecessor, Russell Peterson, the National Audubon Society had decided to focus on "root causes" of environmental problems, such as human population growth and pollution, instead of bird conservation *per se* (Raver 1991). Many in the bird conservation community were alarmed, including Roger Tory Peterson (Raver 1991) and members of the US Section of ICBP. They were afraid that this change in priorities would leave the United States without a national organization clearly dedicated to bird conservation, unlike most other advanced Western countries and several other nations as well. The Nature Conservancy was also unsuccessfully approached to serve as the US partner (G. Fenwick, pers. comm.). O'Brien, together with ICBP Council members Bertrand and Eccles, concluded they could remedy this problem by establishing a new organization specifically to serve as BirdLife International's partner in the United States. They began discussions with Stanley Senner, then chairman of the US Section of ICBP, who, together with Eccles, prepared a plan to develop such an organization in the United States. ICBP agreed to subsidize the new entity during its startup. During this period, Craig Harrison and Lenhart were directors of the US Section of ICBP, Eccles was the treasurer of ICBP, and Senner and Eccles were directors of ICBP Inc. Lynch, Castro de la Mata, and Foster were directors of PACS. These seven individuals, together with O'Brien and Bertrand, would work closely for over three years to establish the new entity and eventually become the founding directors of ABC. The group also worked closely with David Wilcove, then a senior ecologist with the Environmental Defense Fund, who succeeded Senner as the chairman of the US Section of ICBP.

Complicated negotiations

In his memoirs, O'Brien described establishing ABC as "one of the most complicated endeavors with which I have ever been involved ... something akin to creating NATO" (O'Brien 2003). Beginning in 1992, the authors and others held informal discussions about merging the three ICBP entities in the United States into a single organization that would have fundraising capabilities, be a more effective bird conservation organization than the three groups working independently, and employ several permanent staff while remaining "lean and mean." While building upon the PACS endowment and the significant experience and contacts of its founders, its mission would be to promote the conservation of wild birds and the habitats on which they depend. In June 1993, Harrison and Lynch, representing the US Section of ICBP and PACS, respectively, attended an ICBP-sponsored workshop in Cambridge, UK, that addressed global bird-conservation issues. Throughout the week-long meeting, representatives from both developing and European countries emphasized the need for a partner organization in the United States to assist, among other things, in fundraising for the international organization to help partners in developing nations. The personal entreaties by representatives of African nations to Harrison were especially poignant, and focused on the immense conservation problems on that continent and the need for a US partner to help fund projects to address the problems.

Harrison and Lynch returned to the United States with renewed enthusiasm to write a merger proposal that would address governance concerns expressed by the board of directors of PACS and some member organizations of the US Section of ICBP. By September 1993, consensus had developed around a new organizational structure for the US entities affiliated with what had just been renamed BirdLife International (Anonymous 1993). The organization's initial board of directors included three directors each from the US Section of ICBP, PACS, and BirdLife International. The work of PACS would be carried out under the new structure by a special Advisory Council to the board of directors that would focus on Latin American project development, small grants, and expansion of a network of contacts there. The work of the US Section of ICBP would be continued by a second Advisory Council that would advise the Board on all policy matters that affect birds, emphasizing national policy issues in the United States and actions that the federal government takes abroad. Program officers would be hired for each of these areas. The existing funds of the US Section of ICBP and PACS would be contributed to the new organization, and the new entity would enter into a formal memorandum of agreement to become BirdLife International's "partner-designate" in the United States. The new entity would become a full partner once it had the capacity to fully represent BirdLife International in the United States, including financing conservation projects there and abroad as well as contributing funds to the BirdLife International Secretariat. A persuasive reason for the new entity to move forward was BirdLife International's commitment to multi-year startup funding. BirdLife International looked at such funding as an investment in a partner that would be returned many times over.

Mechanics of structuring the new organization

We created a single entity by merging the US Section of ICBP and PACS into ICBP Inc., first transferring the assets of the previous organizations to ICBP Inc., terminating the legal existence of the previous entities, and then formulating a new name for ICBP Inc. This approach avoided the time and expense of establishing a new non-profit corporation and allowed ABC to use ICBP Inc.'s Internal Revenue Service determination for its tax-exempt status. On 5 January 1994, a new board of ICBP Inc. was elected, which was the founding board of ABC (Table 1). This corporate reorganization launched a year of intense activity and negotiations for the new board, which met 12 times in 1994, either by teleconference or in person at Eccles' office in the World Bank in Washington, DC. The board immediately began a process to rename the organization, establish a budget, apply for grants, search for and hire a CEO, locate office space, and formalize its new governance by revising its bylaws (BCA 1994a). The board recruited four additional members in 1994: Alan N. Weeden (January), Brokaw (May), Donald Kennedy (July), and William R. Stott, Jr. (November). In April, the board approved Bird Conservation Alliance (BCA) as the organization's name (BCA 1994b). BCA would not long survive as the new organization's name, but years later would be resurrected as the name of the advisory group to ABC on national policy issues, and that advisory group has grown from 50 to some 220 member organizations. The coalition almost collapsed over PACS' concern that BirdLife International might interfere with the ability of BCA to conduct programs in Latin America, especially with regard to BCA's choice of cooperating institutions (which included several institutions other than existing BirdLife International partners or a small number of partners-designate) and its authority to approach multi-lateral organizations such as the World Bank or Inter-

American Development Bank for funding. This issue was resolved with an understanding that the BirdLife International Secretariat would not unreasonably withhold permission for BCA to undertake projects in Latin American nations with any local cooperating entity (BCA 1994d). On 10 June 1994, Imboden, on behalf of BirdLife International, executed a Declaration of Intent declaring a mutual goal for BCA to become its US partner within two years.

Bertrand chaired the search committee for a CEO, which included Castro de la Mata, Lynch, and Senner. After conducting interviews of the four top candidates, Bertrand reported to the board on 30 June 1994 that two were very qualified. Board members who had not yet met the candidates did so during another round of interviews in mid-July. At the same board meeting, Eccles and Lenhart reported on a meeting they had held with George Fenwick. Fenwick had been trying to develop a new bird organization within The Nature Conservancy but ultimately resigned when he was told to wait a year. On 15 July 1994, the board unanimously offered the CEO position to Stuart Strahl, who ultimately declined for personal reasons. The search committee was back to square one. It placed advertisements in *Science* and the *Ornithological Societies of North America Newsletter* and, by late September 1994, 170 applicants had applied, including Fenwick for the first time. On 27 October 1994, the board “unanimously and enthusiastically” approved Eccles’ motion (seconded by Harrison) to offer Fenwick the position of CEO (BCA 1994d). Fenwick recalls that before he accepted the offer he met with President O’Brien in New York and O’Brien accepted Fenwick’s two conditions for accepting the offer of employment: (1) O’Brien agreed to serve at least one full term as President; and (2) O’Brien agreed to make the new entity his top fundraising priority. On this basis, Fenwick accepted the position and continues as CEO today, although he has announced his retirement pending the appointment of a successor. At the final board meeting of 1994 in late November, Fenwick was officially named president and CEO. At Fenwick’s request, the board agreed in January 1995 to rename the organization the American Bird Conservancy—the name that Fenwick had intended to use for his own, now abandoned, organization (ABC 1995). Bertrand, who had been elected the first chairman of BirdLife International’s Global Council, announced that BirdLife International had formally committed to three years’ support, initially with US\$275,000 for 1995 (BCA 1994e). Together with two donations of US\$75,000 each from the US

Section of ICBP and PACS, ABC had already secured its entire first year of operating funds. The wind was at ABC’s back.

ABC was launched in press releases using its new name in January 1995 (ABC 1995). Brokaw was elected chairman of the board after O’Brien’s resumption of the chairmanship of the National Audubon Society board had begun to consume too much of his time. In April 1995, the corporate records of ICBP Inc. were revised to reflect ABC as its new name. The merger was complete, although for technical reasons the US Section of ICBP and PACS were not formally dissolved until December 1995.

DISCUSSION

Ultimately, the Declaration of Intent for ABC to become the partner of BirdLife International in the United States was not fulfilled. There were personality conflicts between key individuals in each organization that were exacerbated by disagreements over fundraising goals. Moreover, ABC disagreed with BirdLife International’s fundamental approach that each country in Latin America should only have a single partner. ABC preferred working with several entities, especially in large nations where a single bird-conservation organization had not yet evolved to become the dominant entity. To the great disappointment of many board members of ABC and BirdLife International, the relationship did not succeed as they had envisioned. Instead, ABC charted an independent-but-effective course to become a bird-conservation organization for the Americas. After its separation from BirdLife International, the American Bird Conservancy faced many challenges in making the organization a success before it actually took flight. But that is another institution-building story. BirdLife International has prospered in its own chosen format, and its partner in the United States is now the National Audubon Society, whose mission statement has once again embraced birds and bird conservation as a primary theme:

Audubon’s mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity. (National Audubon Society: About Us)

A major lesson learned from this story of the founding of ABC is that if you have an important niche to fill—in this case, the need for a US

TABLE 1
Founding board members and officers of American Bird Conservancy

Name	ABC position	Years served	ICBP/BirdLife International affiliation
Donal C. O’Brien, Jr.	President	1994–2001	Former President, BirdLife International
Stanley E. Senner	Vice President	1994–1997	Chairman, US Section of ICBP
James Lynch	Vice President	1994–1997	Chairman, PACS
Stephen D. Eccles	Treasurer	1994–2000	Treasurer, BirdLife International
Craig S. Harrison	Secretary	1994–2003	Director, US Section of ICBP
Gerard A. Bertrand	Director	1994–2000	Chairman, BirdLife International
Gonzalo Castro de la Mata	Director	1994–2000	Vice Chairman, PACS
Mercedes S. Foster	Director	1994–2001	Former Chairman, PACS
Cynthia Lenhart	Director	1994–2002	Director, US Section of ICBP

ICBP = International Council for Bird Preservation; PACS = Pan American Continental Section.

entity whose primary purpose is bird conservation in the Americas—it is worth the effort to persevere until you achieve success. One should be put off neither by the difficulties posed by existing organizations that may view a startup as a competitor in fundraising or in “taking credit” for conservation successes, nor by the financial struggles with which any new body is bound to be faced. The founding group must be fully committed to bringing this exercise to a successful conclusion and should not be put off by the difficulties. The second lesson is that one needs to be flexible in the process. As examples, if we had been inflexibly tied to our original vision of a partnership with BirdLife International or had been reluctant to contributing some of the PACS endowment for small conservation grants towards ABC’s first year of operational expenses, we might ultimately have failed. The third, and perhaps most important lesson, is that one must take extreme care in the selection of the first CEO—the individual has to be someone you think will be completely committed to the project and has the talent to recruit, manage, and retain staff; raise funds; and implement a lasting vision.

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