

FEBRUARY 2021



# Puget Sound Conservation Strategy

Creating a resilient future for coastal birds and  
communities



Northern Pintail.  
Photo: Warren Hatch/Audubon Photography Awards



The birds of Puget Sound and the greater Salish Sea are a source of delight and wonder, enriching our lives and helping define our sense of place. Catching a glimpse of the flashy, orange legs of the black-and-white Pigeon Guillemot when it dives in search of food, a flock of Dunlin alighting in unison on a tidal mudflat, or even the sight of a spiky-headed Red-breasted Merganser off the city pier reminds us that we are connected to birds and wild places near and far. In fact, science shows that we're connected in all kinds of ways—birds and their habitat provide mental and physical health benefits, and even support local economies and natural infrastructure.

These birds need our care and stewardship, with over 70 species of shorebirds, waterfowl, marsh birds, and seabirds relying on Puget Sound during some part of their life cycle. Our work to foster a healthy Puget Sound environment is critical to ensure that these birds—and the people that enjoy them—are able to thrive for generations to come.

### HABITAT AND SPECIES AT RISK

During European settlement in the 1900s, nearly 80% of Puget Sound tidal wetlands were diked and converted to agriculture, resulting in an untold loss of birds and biodiversity. Today, our region is home to some 4.5 million people, with another 1.3 million expected by 2040. The rapid pace of population growth is exacerbating issues that affect the health

of Puget Sound, like habitat conversion, storm water runoff and toxic contaminants. Climate change is already changing ocean temperatures and driving ocean acidification, which in turn causes changes to the base of the food web. Shorebirds, seabirds, and other marine species are experiencing global declines, and the status of Puget Sound populations are not well understood.

### COMMUNITIES AT RISK

The coastal wetlands, shores, and marine waters of Puget Sound are a core part of our region's identity and economic vitality, supporting fisheries, maritime trade, and renowned recreational opportunities. Unique among large ecosystem recovery efforts, the state has set statutory goals to improve human well-being, and recognizes that a functioning Puget Sound ecosystem is essential to the quality of human life. This is particularly true for the 20+ Tribes and Tribal Nations recognized within the Puget Sound region.

Climate change puts Tribal treaty rights, coastal communities, and their ways of life at risk. Increased flood risk associated with sea-level rise and heavy rain events threatens homes, businesses, and infrastructure, and changing ocean and weather conditions have impacts on natural resource economies, including fisheries and agriculture. Birds also face risks due to climate change, and we are committed to working together with Tribes and frontline coastal communities to advance solutions that build resilience for birds and historically marginalized communities.

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Birds connect people to Puget Sound and serve as indicators of marine and estuarine ecosystem health. They also have cultural value for Tribal communities, and are beloved by millions of people.

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Snow Geese in Skagit Valley.  
Photo: Sheila Pera

## PUGET SOUND PROGRAM

Audubon's Puget Sound Program is centered on the idea that bold action and strategic investment is needed to ensure a healthy and resilient Puget Sound where birds and people thrive. Our program leverages the power of birds—along with Audubon's unique organizational structure—to pursue conservation, science, and policy actions at the local, state, and federal level. We do this by bringing together the grassroots advocacy strength of our 13 local Puget Sound Audubon chapters with the policy, science, and conservation expertise of our state and national offices. By leveraging the power of the Audubon network towards shared goals for Puget Sound recovery, Audubon's Puget Sound program will accelerate the pace and impact of Puget Sound recovery over the next three years in ways that meaningfully benefit birds, ecosystem health, and people.

### Puget Sound Program Priority Bird Species

American Bittern  
American Wigeon  
Dunlin  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Green-winged Teal  
Marsh Wren  
Northern Pintail  
Pacific Brant  
Pigeon Guillemot  
Rhinoceros Auklet  
Western Sandpiper

support tool that helps us identify priority sites for bird conservation and ecosystem protection in Puget Sound. We identified priority birds and habitats and combined them with regional information such as nearshore habitat condition and coastal resilience, and co-benefits like forage fish spawning areas, Chinook salmon critical habitat, and popular birding locations. We also included information about socially vulnerable populations to help us prioritize protection and restoration of coastal habitats in frontline communities. These communities are often subject to environmental injustices and have less capacity to adapt to the challenges of climate change.

The Blueprint (Figure 1) points us toward the suite of priority places that when collectively restored and protected will not only secure vital habitat for Puget Sound birds now and in the future, but will build resilience and improve health for socially vulnerable communities.



Dunlin.  
Photo: Kyle Dudgeon/Audubon Photography Awards

## TARGETING OUR WORK FOR GREATEST CONSERVATION IMPACT

When it comes to coastal resilience and restoration, science-based planning, local input, and community support are crucial. Audubon's conservation and science teams created the Puget Sound Conservation Blueprint, a conservation decision-



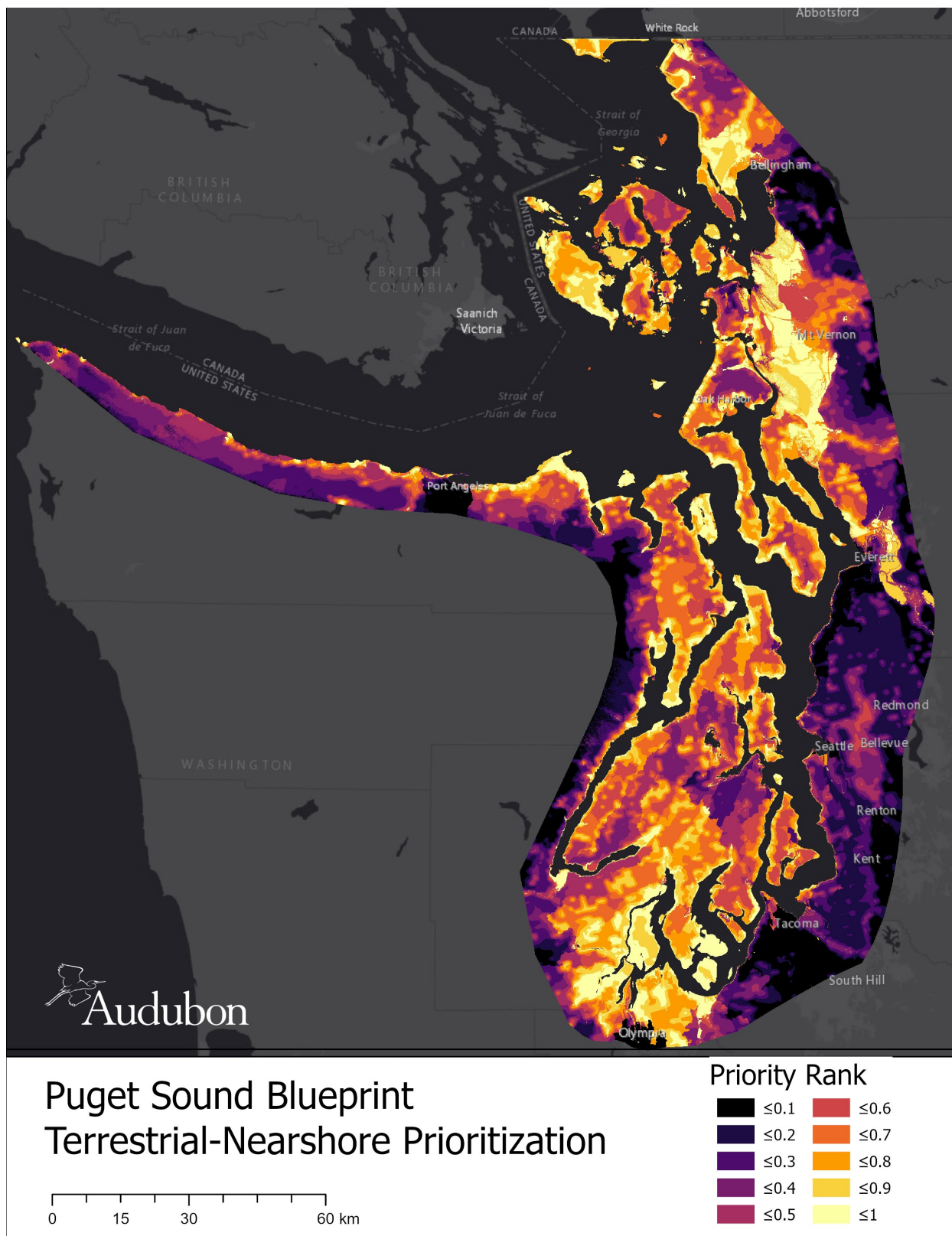


Figure 1: High-priority areas for birds and people in Puget Sound, based on Audubon's spatial analysis of habitat value and social vulnerability. Priority rankings range from 0-1, with ≤1 (yellow) indicating the highest ranking sites for conservation, and ≤0.1 (black) indicating the lowest ranking sites for conservation.

## CONSERVATION IMPACT



### STRATEGY 1: ADVANCE POLICIES THAT PROMOTE A HEALTHY AND RESILIENT PUGET SOUND FOR BIRDS AND PEOPLE

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in Puget Sound recovery in recent decades, yet meaningful progress towards ecosystem recovery targets will require much bolder action in the face of population growth and climate change. Eighty-six percent of Puget Sound residents agree that restoration of Puget Sound is a good use of tax dollars, yet only 34% trust local policy-makers to make good decisions about Puget Sound restoration, suggesting that public engagement with decision-makers is a vital need.

Audubon is the voice for birds from town halls to the U.S. Capitol. We are bringing our powerful advocacy platform to bear in activating our 25 chapters and 50,000+ members statewide to speak out in support of policies and funding that support food, habitat, and climate resilience for birds and people through action alerts, letters, meetings with elected officials, and our annual advocacy day.

#### *Conservation Actions:*

- Advocate for enhanced, long-term comprehensive planning for climate resilience under Washington's Growth Management Act and associated shoreline policies.
- Advocate for environmental policies that integrate environmental justice and decrease environmental health disparities.
- Advance policies that improve our ability to monitor and protect important food and habitat resources for birds.
- Enact and strengthen state forage fish management policies that protect shoreline spawning habitat, manage harvest, or fill critical information gaps.
- Support the passage of bird-friendly amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Act and the Ocean-Based Climate Solutions Act, which will put ocean-based industries to work in promoting ecological health and resilience.

## STRATEGY 2: PROTECT, RESTORE, AND ENHANCE PUGET SOUND PRIORITY HABITATS TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR MIGRATORY BIRDS, FISH, AND HUMAN COMMUNITIES

To date, local implementation partners in Puget Sound have achieved approximately 43% of the Puget Sound Partnership's 2020 target for 7,380 acres of quality estuarine wetlands restored. This goal is not sufficient to meet the combined challenges of population growth and climate change, and more action is needed to meet the current goal. Audubon will use the Puget Sound Conservation Blueprint as our guide to expand efforts to fund, develop, and support innovative climate-resilient coastal protection and restoration efforts in places identified that support historically marginalized or frontline communities.

### *Conservation Actions:*

- Work with partners and chapter members to drive \$350 million in new funding to Puget Sound priority protection and restoration projects.
- Increase appropriations for Puget Sound Recovery under the EPA Geographic Program from \$38 million to \$50 million.
- Work with local chapters, Tribes, partners, and frontline communities to identify and advance key protection strategies in a suite of priority places with the goal of advancing climate adaptation strategies, including reducing flood risk and increasing coastal resilience, improving habitats for birds and other wildlife, and reducing environmental health disparities. Support local Tribes' goals to restore estuary habitat (e.g., 1,615 acres of estuary habitat in Stillaguamish River delta by 2025 [Stillaguamish Tribe]).

## STRATEGY 3: BUILD SCIENCE FOUNDATION FOR INTEGRATION OF BIRDS IN PUGET SOUND RECOVERY

Puget Sound and the Salish Sea support hemispherically significant concentrations of shorebirds, waterfowl, and other marine bird species. Despite this importance, birds have received little attention by state and federal recovery efforts. Audubon Washington coordinates the Marine Birds Work Group associated with the Puget Sound Ecosystem Monitoring Program, a monitoring network of topical work groups that deliver information for Puget Sound recovery efforts and decision-makers.

Audubon is leading the development of science products that support the management needs of marine birds and shorebirds, including end-user stakeholder engagement, [avian-habitat suitability models](#), and the initiation of a regional [avian monitoring framework](#) for river delta estuaries. These efforts will ensure a common understanding of changing threats to birds and document the progress of restoration and protection efforts.



Greater Yellowlegs.  
Photo: Brad James/Audubon Photography Awards

### *Conservation Actions:*

- Collaborate with state, Tribal, and nonprofit partners to develop an avian monitoring framework for Puget Sound estuaries that lays the foundation for a stronger, science-based approach to bird management and conservation. The resulting data will help reduce and mitigate threats to birds and will inform restoration design, ensuring that Puget Sound continues to serve as a vital link for Pacific Flyway birds.
- Develop bird-habitat relationship models for estuary-associated birds to identify priority areas for conservation and conduct outreach with end-users to inform habitat management, monitoring and restoration decisions.
- Disseminate and publicize the findings of this work to the public and key decision-makers to build awareness and support for avian monitoring and management needs.