

From Yucatán to New Jersey, Joining Hands to Preserve a Flyway

By TINA KELLEY

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP, N.J. — The Eastern phoebe was one of the first songbirds to arrive this spring in the Sourland Mountains, a 90-square-mile swath of central New Jersey known among naturalists as an oasis for birds on their way north for the spring.

The plain little bird, with obsidian eyes and a call that sounds like its name, sat in a tree by a cow pasture that will go wild as part of what bird lovers hope will be a hemisphere-spanning conservation partnership.

Tracing the flyway used by the phoebe and more than 60 other bird species that winter in the Yucatán peninsula but breed in New Jersey, the D&R Land Trust, based in Princeton, has formed a partnership with Friends of Calakmul, a land trust in the Yucatán.

The partnership, believed to be a first, is raising money for a research station in Mexico and sharing scientific knowledge about the birds that travel between the two regions.

To create a network that spans the hemisphere, the D&R Greenway group is also negotiating ways to work with the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, which preserves land in a region that is the summertime destination of many of the migrating birds.

Rob Aldrich, a spokesman for the national Land Trust Alliance, said his group was not familiar with any other partnerships between United States and foreign land trusts.

Greg Butcher, director of bird conservation for the National Audubon Society, said the land trusts were following a strategy taken by other conservation groups; local Audubon chapters, for example, work with conservation groups in Central America.

"We actually think this is the wave of the future," he said. "About two-thirds of the songbirds in the United States winter at least partly south of the border, so if you want to be confident that you're conserving these species, you have to do work south of the U.S. just to save our own birds."

Friends of Calakmul, based in San Mateo, Calif., is working to preserve 500,000 acres of habitat for the endangered jaguar within the 1.7-million-acre Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. A viable jaguar population needs 650,000 acres of undisturbed land, and the area preserved for jaguars is home to a rich variety of birds.

Some, like cedar waxwings, ovenbirds, rose-breasted grosbeaks, indigo buntings and Baltimore orioles, use the Maya forest as winter habitat and the Sourlands for spring breeding.

Friends of Calakmul has developed leasing arrangements with indigenous landowners within the reserve, in which the logging rights to the land are placed in trust, and the group pays residents an annual fee to conserve their land.

Cheri Sugal, executive director of Friends of Calakmul, said the D&R Greenway Land Trust had raised \$30,000 for land for the proposed research station in Mexico and put her group in touch with the Beneficia Foundation, which gave money in support of the "sister land trust" partnership.

"We couldn't do what we're doing without this kind of collaboration," she said.

The pairing began in 2003, after the possibility of international partnerships was discussed at a national land trust rally. Some Greenway workers later visited a conference in Mexico on conservation in Latin America, said Bill Rawlyk, director of land preservation for the land trust.

"If you stand on top of a pyramid and see 100 miles of unbroken forest, it's crystal clear," he said, recalling his visit to the ruins in the Yucatán. "You see our species. And it's clear that these species need both habitats to exist."

Bonnie Sutherland, executive director of the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, said its partnership with the New Jersey land trust was still in the exploratory stages, and added that longer-range plans included working with Friends of Calakmul as well.

Many of her group's donors are Americans. "We have birds and people using the flyway," she said.

"A lot of summer residents up here bring with them a long history of the land trust movement and an understanding of how critical this is," she went on, noting that land trusts in Canada are in their infancy by comparison.

The Americans travel from places that 20 years ago looked as unspoiled as Nova Scotia, and understand what happens to coastlines that are not protected.

On a recent tour through the Sourland Mountains, elevation all of 440 feet above sea level, Mr. Rawlyk drove past the driveway to the former estate of Charles A. Lindbergh, where the aviator's baby son was kidnapped in 1932. Mr. Rawlyk pointed out woody areas full of volcanic boulders and explained that the region's name came from its acidic, iron-rich soil.

That rocky soil has tended to keep farming and development away, and the mountains are sparsely populated.

The Greenway land trust is trying to keep it that way, by buying up land that might otherwise be developed. In its 17-year history, it has preserved 8,477 acres of land valued at more than \$178 million.

In such deep woods, the migrant birds find fewer predators and a richer understory, without invasive exotic plants like multiflora roses, honeysuckle and autumn olive, Mr. Rawlyk said.

The phoebe was catching insects in another important Sourlands habitat, grasslands. The high farm field offered a soaring view of the countryside down toward the Delaware River.

"The mountains are the first ridge the birds hit as they fly up the piedmont," he said. "It's a magnet for birds."