



Connecting People with Nature

Audubon Society of Rhode Island

April 20, 2021

Dear

I am writing today to ask for your support for the Forest Conservation Act (S 470, H 5760), the Audubon Society of Rhode Island's top remaining legislative priority for 2021.

Audubon was founded in 1897 by people gravely concerned about the unregulated slaughter of birds for their feathers. Today, birds are disappearing from the skies at a rate that shocks ornithologists. Since the 1970s our continent has lost 3 billion birds, nearly 30% of the total. Even common birds like sparrows and blackbirds are in decline due to climate change and other human caused environmental disruptions. What we see happening to birds is also happening to other plant and animal species.

In June of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, Audubon's board approved a new strategic plan for 2020 – 2025. The plan was developed with input from almost 60 key informants including elected officials, business leaders, state and local government, conservation partners, funders and Audubon volunteers. Everyone interviewed for the plan spoke about the urgency of climate change and directed Audubon to direct our efforts at addressing the climate crisis.

In response to this direction, our two top legislative priorities for 2021 were passage of the Act On Climate bill (S 78, H 5445) and passage of the Forest Conservation Act. We are thrilled to see passage of Act On Climate and thank you for getting it done. We hope you can also support and move the Forest Conservation Act.

More than half of Rhode Island's land area is currently forested. About 125,000 acres or 34% of this forest is permanently protected. Audubon protects almost 10,000 acres. State, federal and local government as well as the Nature Conservancy and local land trusts protect most of the rest. However, most of the state's forested land is still privately owned. Individual properties are typically small, but taken together these private landowners control about 68% of the state's remaining forestlands.

Birds and wildlife thrive in large blocks of unfragmented forests and some birds like the Scarlet Tanager, Barred Owl and Pileated Woodpecker require unfragmented forest to breed. Fragmented forests experience higher predation, warmer temperatures, more wind and more invasive species.

Forest fragmentation and conversion to other land uses are the biggest threats to Rhode Island's forests. Nearly 2,000 acres of core forest were converted to other land uses between 2011 and 2018. Other threats to forests include invasive species, deer browsing and climate change.

In addition to providing habitat for the birds and wildlife Audubon members treasure, forests provide a range of other ecological benefits. Forests absorb hazardous air pollution. Forests filter water to keep drinking water supplies clean. More than 80% of Rhode Island's population rely on reservoirs surrounded by mostly forested watersheds for their drinking water. When we think of climate change and making Rhode Island resilient, forests are an important tool, sequestering 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide each year.

The Forest Conservation Act provides a framework for the RI Department of Environmental Management to work collaboratively with the private landowners who own, steward and pay taxes on forested land to maximize shared benefits of forested lands. We believe it is an important step for addressing climate change and encourage you to support the bill.

Please enjoy the enclosed brochure on Forest Values and do not hesitate to reach out to me or Audubon's Director of Policy, Meg Kerr, if you have questions about this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawrence J. F. Taft". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lawrence J. F. Taft
Executive Director