



Pelee Island Bird Observatory Vision & Three-Year Strategic Plan

- 2024-26 -



Map - The Pelee Island Bird Observatory (PIBO) is uniquely situated on the most southerly island in Canada, nestled in the western arc of Lake Erie, between the mainlands of Ontario, Canada, and Ohio, in the United States. Most importantly, Pelee Island lies in the path of two major migratory flyways for songbirds that breed in Ontario and winter in Mexico, Cuba, and Central and South America and. <https://pibo.ca/en/>

Fly in and explore Pelee Island on Google Earth: [Pelee Island - Google Earth](#)

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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Pelee Island is a globally recognized and irreplaceable migratory bird stopover for tens of millions of migratory birds travelling along two major eastern North America flyways that converge over Pelee Island.

PIBO was established to shine a light on the Island and its birds and to raise awareness of the Island's vital role in preserving the fragile avian hemispheric migration phenomena.

Over its 20-year history of collecting data, PIBO has documented the decline of migratory bird populations, contributing to a global call to action in 2019 to halt and reverse the loss of North America's breeding birds, whose populations have declined by 3 billion since 1970.

PIBO's data recently supported the formal designation of the Island as a [Key Biodiversity Area](#), one of a handful in the Americas.

In this climate-challenged era, restoring the island's ecological function is imperative to safeguard one of the premier refuges for migratory birds along the Atlantic Flyway and contribute to broader efforts to bring back North America's birds.

Building on the data it has collected over the past 20 years, PIBO will prioritize:

- tracking and monitoring migratory and breeding birds on Pelee Island;
- mainstreaming birds and habitat management into local decision-making;
- raising awareness through a targeted regional and urban initiatives in the Windsor area; and
- collaborating with like-minded education, outreach, science, and conservation groups along the two major eastern North America avian migratory flyways.

To achieve these goals, PIBO will:

- forge strategic partnerships with local private landowners, key decision makers on Pelee Island and in Essex County, like-minded networks, academic institutions, and Indigenous leaders;
- build a small, state-of-the-art bird centre on the Island and will continue its tradition of promoting ethical banding—one of the first bird observatories in Canada to do so—through specialized training and internships;
- collaborate with new international partners along flyways to preserve shared species in their wintering and passage habitats in the United States, Mexico, and Latin America and the Caribbean, concentrating on piloting work in Mexico and Cuba;
- organize high profile local and international events to raise awareness of the region's importance for migratory birds, including Spring Song, the Graeme Gibson Fellowship, and the U.N. endorsed World Migratory Bird Day; and
- raise an Endowment of \$5 million during the next three years to secure PIBO's long-term future, enabling it to secure a strong foundation for its work to conserve birds locally and throughout the Americas.

1. BACKGROUND

Acting as stepping-stones across Lake Erie, the Pelee Island archipelago is amongst a handful of sites in the Western Hemisphere providing safe passage for a staggering number of migratory birds. During spring, radar images have detected tens of millions of birds moving across this region, many “falling-out” on the island where they seek food and shelter, while waiting for the right weather conditions to continue their journey to their breeding and wintering grounds, often thousands of kilometres distant.

Up until the mid-1900s, most of Pelee Island was forested. Archaeological evidence suggests that human inhabitants arrived as early as 7500 BCE, indicating a long presence of Indigenous peoples on the island and in southwestern Ontario¹. By 1955, after large swathes of the island were diked and drained, much of the island was converted to agriculture. Today, several sizeable woodlots and wetlands remain, including two conservation areas bookending the northern and southern reaches of the island, creating critical habitat for migratory birds.

Pelee Island is home to 250 resident people, a population that increases tenfold in the summer as visitors from the mainland travel by ferry to visit Pelee Island’s winery and sandy beaches, as well as to hunt, birdwatch and explore the rural landscape. Local produce, including grapes, soybean, tobacco and corn, continue to be harvested.

While its importance as a migratory bird refuge along the Central Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways has long been known, limited scientific data was available to quantify the migratory phenomena. Without this information, it was difficult to recommend effective strategies for maintaining conditions that make the Island an important stopover site. In response, a small group of intrepid conservationists led by Graeme Gibson the Younger, an experienced bird bander, established the Pelee Island Bird Observatory (PIBO) in 2003. As attitudes towards birds have changed over recent years, there is increasing appreciation and support for their conservation.

Over the following 20 years, working with local stakeholders, PIBO banded over 10,000 birds, providing a rich source of data on the abundance and diversity of the Island’s bird species, both migrating and resident. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Nature Conservancy of Canada have used the data to inform conservation investments on the Island’s wetlands and forests. PIBO was an early adopter of an ethical approach to banding, now common practice across a network of Bird Observatories in Canada.

In 2016, recognizing its contribution to science, PIBO was invited to join the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network. Data collected was used to establish Pelee Island as a Key Biodiversity Area—one of a handful of sites in Canada recently recognized by the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change.

¹ Pelee Island is the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, comprising the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi Nations. Specifically, this is the home of Caldwell First Nation, and part of the house of Walpole Island First Nation.

Aware that Essex County, the closest mainland, has the lowest tree canopy coverage in Ontario, PIBO expanded its work into the county and focused on raising awareness of the region's importance and role in conserving migratory species. PIBO's education materials have engaged thousands of elementary students, raising bird and conservation awareness in children and their parents—a first step to building a local constituency for its bird preservation work. In 2022, PIBO secured Windsor as one of the first [Bird-Friendly](#) Cities in Canada, paving the way for mainstreaming bird awareness into the fabric of everyday life.

Considering that [three billion birds](#) have been lost across North America since the 1970s, PIBO is uniquely positioned to catalyse local, regional and hemispheric action to halt this decline, working in unison with others along the flyways who also recognize the need to act both locally and globally to safeguard the migratory phenomena. The following lays out PIBO's plan to achieve this.

2. VISION

Making Pelee Island a unique and vital part of the international effort to preserve wild and migratory birds and protect our threatened planet.

3. MISSION

Uniquely situated in a globally recognized Key Biodiversity Area, Pelee Island Bird Observatory (PIBO):

- *collects and collates scientific data related to migratory bird studies;*
- *delivers public outreach education programs; and*
- *actively collaborates with avian organizations along the Americas flyways;*

As part of a joint local-international effort to preserve migratory birds.

4. OUR VALUES

Pelee Island Bird Observatory is committed to

- ethical, environmentally sensitive approaches
- diversity and inclusion
- teamwork, consensus, and collaboration
- gathering and sharing responsible and trustworthy data
- respectfully engaging with our Island community

5. S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis identified the priority issues below:

<p>Strengths (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 20 years of scientific study in a highly unmatched biological ecosystem • Senior Bander(s)/trainers with over 50 years of combined experience collecting and sharing data on migratory birds • Founders of ethical banding protocols (first of its kind at the time) • Experienced and proven track record in education and public and scientific outreach capacity • Deeply engaged, diversified and connected board of directors • Diversity of funding opportunities (under-realized) • Strong social media platforms in place • New, centrally located and publicly available PIBO bird centre on Pelee Island • Nascent work in Mexico 	<p>Weaknesses (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited operational capacity due to poor facilities on Pelee Island • No formal and consistent operational presence on PI or Windsor; geographically dispersed. • Staff capacity limited • No HR policies • Reliance on year-to-year funding (vs longer-term) • No long-term strategic plan • Lack of national recognition • Purpose of data collection unclear • Bird centre requires renovations to make it fit for purpose
<p>Opportunities (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nascent recognition in Windsor and area of Bird City designation • Unique outreach opportunities to link to PI events including Spring Song, Big Bird Day • Engaged local stakeholders on Pelee Island • Local brand recognition • Linkage to broader network of banding stations (CMMN) • Proximity to research facilities (University of London-AFAR, Birds Canada) • Site designated as a Key Biodiversity Area (recently) 	<p>Threats (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical habitat loss in Essex country - greenhouse expansion • Bird populations across NA in full decline • Isolated location of PI limits attracting staff • Other NGOs better recognized (NCC, BC, NC) and therefore better able to secure funds

Combining strengths and opportunities, the following strategies emerged:

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with research organizations to establish research questions to focus banding activities • Train cohort of experienced banders to carry on bird banding research on PI • Seek longer-term donor opportunities including establishment of endowment • Support Windsor designation as Bird-Friendly City through outreach, engagement and training activities, including integrating PI into the effort 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness of the global importance of PI and Essex County for migratory birds 	
Threats		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete a strategic plan (3-5 years) and seek input from community (once stakeholders are defined) Create a science advisory (with universities) to guide banding data collection/ analyses Strengthen banding operation (highlight certification, excellent facilities, scholarships) Explore opportunities to engage local communities through events and or other activities on PI (including Spring Song, World Bird Day, KBAs)

6. GOALS (3 years):

A. Purpose related -

1. Contribute to improving our knowledge and understanding of migratory bird populations dependent on Pelee Island and environs *through a rigorous scientific approach using latest bird banding and monitoring techniques in coordination with the CMMN.* (LOCAL). Specific activities:

- Lead annual bird banding initiative;
- Recruit and sustain technical capacity to support bird banding efforts on Pelee Island including through internships;
- Maintain banding permits for primary banding and acquire a banding permit for the banding station;
- Standardize data collection to ensure it is compatible with similar efforts ongoing across Canada;
- Share the results of PIBO's banding and monitoring work with supporters, decision makers and academic intuitions; and
- Establish scientific advisory committee.

2. Advance awareness of the region's local, regional and international importance to migratory species through education and outreach activities on Pelee Island and Essex Country *through provision of educational materials, celebrations, and other engagement activities.* (REGIONAL). Specific activities:

- Centered on the Windsor Bird-Friendly City, coordinate with Nature Canada & Birds Canada, implementing activities in support of the recent designation;
- Where relevant, explore specific children-based education initiatives to build and strengthen a constituency for conservation of birds and Pelee Island in particular;

- Participate in high profile events on Pelee Island and environs to promote the value of birds and birdwatching to the region (e.g., Spring Song, World Migratory Bird Day); and
- Advocate or inform on issues impacting Pelee Islands birds and bird habitat (e.g., siting of windfarms in Pigeon Bay).

3. Connect local science, education and outreach activities, to broader, hemispheric flyway initiatives *including site twinning, international exchanges, bird-friendly practices, and international fellowships.* (INTERNATIONAL). Specific activities:

- Explore linkages with priority migratory sites (possibly other similar bottle-neck sites or habitat for shared species) and establish mutual supporting relationships to benefit conservation;
- Expand the Prismaticos Project binocular/ book exchange with local conservation groups in Latin Americas with compatible needs and interest (e.g., Mexico, Cuba, other);
- Promote bird-friendly practices including through the Atwood coffee initiative that promotes PIBO's work;
- Establish links with northern stakeholders with a focus on promoting Indigenous values, engaging youth through scholarships such as INDISPIRE, and recognition of their critical role in preserving the boreal destination for many of Pelee Island's passage migrants; and
- Establish international internship program with young biologists from areas with shared species (i.e., Mexico, Central & South America).

B. Financial -

1. Commensurate with the needs of the organization, grow and diversify the organization's funding base, including the stewardship of existing and new donors, and the creation of an Endowment to sustain the core costs of the organization. Specific activities:

- Revise financial management systems to accommodate budget growth and fund development;
- Implement a "moves management" plan to grow individual donations to PIBO;
- Maintain PIBO fundraising gala event in Toronto as core activity for raising operational funds and growing interest in the organization's mandate;
- Build and expand PIBO's online community fundraising efforts with engaging and appealing remote event services thus reaching a far greater avian following.
- Establish a \$5 million endowment to sustain the work of PIBO over the next 5-10 years; and
- Increase PIBO's individual, foundation, and government funding to match renovation expenses and increased operational costs by 2026.

C. Organizational -

1. Strengthen the organization's governance by broadening the board's membership and ensuring continued compliance with its bylaws. Specific activities:

- Recruit seasoned Board members to increase PIBO's working board to 8-10 members, including directors with financial not-for-profit skills; charitable legal knowledge; strong connections with Pelee Island (ideally a resident) and Essex County conservation-minded groups and individuals;
- Ensure board member selection criteria includes individuals who bring not-for-profit legal, financial management and communications capacities; and
- Carry out regular audits of the bylaws as part of board duties to ensure compliance.

2. Broaden the organisation's resources by establishing a strong and globally respected Advisory Board - see accompanying Advisory Board considerations document.

3. Ensure the organization's staffing responsibilities are defined and staffing policies and processes are in place, maintained current and compliant. Specific activities:

- Review Terms of Reference (TORs) for the Executive Director, ensuring TORs provide sufficient responsibility for overseeing existing staff and recruiting new staff.
- Complete and seek board approval for a staffing handbook;
- Carry out regular reviews of the staffing handbook and make changes as necessary to ensure PIBO is compliant with Ontario Employment Standards, CRA requirements, and Corporations Canada guidelines for federal non-for-profits; and
- Strengthen PIBO's operational capacity in Windsor (and beyond) to support urban-based initiatives.

4. Evaluate a Friends of PIBO (FOP) organization that can assist with community engagement, fund development, and create a pool from which future Board members might be drawn. Specific activities:

- Complete the business case for creating a FOP and if board approves, establish a working entity.

5. Explore new relationships with regional and international organizations to help deepen PIBO's work and connect to others engaged in researching and conserving shared species along their flyways. Specific activities:

- Undertake a SWOT analysis for identifying potential organizations that align with PIBO's interests and priorities (including BirdLife, BirdLife's partners, and other organizations with shared interests);
- Pilot joint projects with a small subset of organizations as a first step towards building relationships to conserve shared species;
- Deepen PIBO's local conservation group approach and position it as a supporting mechanism for other groups with aspirations for the same; and

- Explore strengthening a network of lower Great Lakes banding organizations to share experiences, challenges and opportunities, including hosting BO representatives at PIBO to discuss closer working relationships.

D. Operational -

1. Strengthen operational base on Pelee Island and mainland, including (a) a fully functional research/education operation on Pelee Island capable of housing seasonal staff, and (b) a regional coordination office based in Windsor. Specific activities:

- Restore newly purchased PIBO “Bird Centre” to a fully functional bird research and educational outreach centre with capacity to support seasonal technicians and others carrying out work on Pelee Island;
- Promote local conservation work through the PIBO’s outreach materials and ensure close coordination with other local, likeminded, and interested groups; and
- Secure a coordination office for PIBO in Windsor to support our work on the mainland including the Windsor Bird-Friendly City celebration.

2. Build on and enhance operating capacity including administrative, communication and financial tools, as well as banding and other bird monitoring equipment. Specific activities:

- Update equipment and programs to ensure effective implementation of PIBO’s work;
- Ensure all data collected by PIBO is safeguarded in a suitable data management program (if necessary, forge relationship with interested and trusted party to help manage data);
- Confirm and complete annual audit using outside company; and
- Maintain and keep current PIBO’s web site and regular outreach materials.

3. Expand staffing capacity to address priority strategies of the organization with a focus on leadership, technical and management skills. Specific activities:

- Based on strategy approval by Board, carry out a staff skills audit to identify core skill sets required to implement the 3-year strategy; and
- Ensure core capacity in the short-term including (1) Executive Director, (2) Certified Bander, (3) Fundraiser/ Communicator, and (4) Educator or Outreach Coordinator.

7. MEASURING SUCCESS

Successfully implemented over a three-year period, these goals and strategies will ensure that birds are effectively mainstreamed into daily activities, resulting in local improvements in bird populations dependent on Pelee Island and Essex County. Through this strategy, PIBO will position itself as the lead local bird conservation organization, focussed on implementing programs that will increase awareness of the region’s birds while ensuring its rigorously and responsibly collected data is available to decision-makers at all levels. Specific measurable outputs include:

- Critical habitat is preserved for migratory birds on Pelee Island;

- Robust and reliable data is collected, stored, and used to inform conservation land-use decisions;
- Pelee Island community, individually and politically, is engaged in and supportive of PIBOs work; PIBO is engaged in other nature-related activities on Pelee Island;
- Strategic partnerships are forged with CMMN, internationally recognized Western University AFAR program, City of Windsor, Birds Canada, Nature Canada, BirdLife International and Indigenous group;
- PIBO is an effective local, yet geographically meaningful, conservation group actively safeguarding the Pelee Island KBA;
- Operational capacity on Pelee Island is secured and supports PIBO’s bird monitoring initiative; and
- Fundraising is diversified and sufficient to meet proposed renovations and ongoing, increased operational costs, and an Endowment Fund is established to sustain PIBOs work into the future.

8. STAKEHOLDERS

To effectively implement its mission, PIBO will work with three categories of stakeholders:

(1) Island based	(2) Essex County based	(3) Beyond
Includes residents, local businesses, birders, organizations including Heritage Centre, municipalities, and donors	Includes municipality and donors	Includes broader public, Indigenous communities, science centres (e.g., Universities), BirdLife International, Canadian Migratory Bird Monitoring Network (CMMN), Nature Canada, Birds Canada, Nature Conservancy of Canada, other donors
LOCAL	REGIONAL	FLYWAY

PIBO will tailor its outreach efforts to effectively engage each of the listed stakeholder groups through its various communications and outreach channels.

9. BUDGET

Over this 3-year strategy period, PIBO will become a half-million-dollar organization (core operations), with 4-5 staff and several temporary technical staff and interns. Projected income will increase by 50%. PIBO will implement its research, project, and outreach goals through a headquarters in Windsor, with field and banding offices on Pelee Island. Field activities will focus on Pelee Island, while outreach activities will be carried out across Essex County and beyond.

Refer to 3-year budget in Annex A.

10. DEVELOPMENT

In years one through to three, PIBO will raise \$350,000, 400,000 and \$450,000 respectively (not including costs associated with the construction of the PIBO Bird Centre. The bulk of PIBO's funds will be derived from events and gifts, both important sources of unrestricted revenues. In 2025, PIBO will begin to focus on increasing its project revenue stream through private and/ or family foundations, and governments.

In addition, by 2026, PIBO will establish a \$5M endowment to ensure core operational costs of the organization are secured, allowing the organization to offset its core costs and more competitively compete for project funding.

Refer to 3-year operational plan in Annex B.