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Safeguarding Neotropical Songbirds: A Collaborative Approach
A Briefing Paper

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By

The Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group (NSCG)

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Executive Summary

The Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group (NSCG) represents a timely and multi-stakeholder response to the escalating crisis affecting neotropical songbirds across the Americas and Caribbean. Established in early 2025 following the abrupt pause in funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Songbird Catalyst Conservation Fund (SCCF), the NSCG integrates the expertise of civil society actors such as NGOs, researchers, enforcement personnel, and diaspora communities, as well as governments. The NSCG addresses the interconnected threats of illegal trade, habitat loss, enforcement gaps, cultural complexities, and data deficiencies through coordinated regional action closely aligned with international agreements, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW Protocol).

The NSCG's immediate strategic actions focus on three flagship activities: formally launching and institutionalising the group with a governance framework; securing funding to sustain and expand conservation projects initially supported by the SCCF; and developing and managing the website (NeotropicalSongbirds.org) as a regional communication platform. SPAW Parties are strongly encouraged to support the NSCG's species assessments, actively participate in multi-sector dialogues, and promote the group's efforts to foster regional leadership, robust scientific collaboration, and practical biodiversity conservation outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group (NSCG) was established to coordinate a structured and community-based response to the growing threats facing neotropical songbird populations. Through an integrated approach combining targeted field research, socially informed public-awareness initiatives, and strategic policy engagement, the NSCG directly complements existing international instruments, notably the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW Protocol) under the Cartagena Convention. By bridging a critical operational gap between localised conservation efforts and regional and international decision-making processes, the NSCG supports Parties in fulfilling their obligations under CITES and SPAW, particularly concerning species threatened by international trade.

Across the Neotropics, which is made up of South America, Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and southern North America, the songbird trade has become increasingly concentrated along a supply chain anchored primarily in Brazil (de Oliveira et al., 2020), Trinidad and Tobago (Gibson, 2023), Colombia (Goodman, 2019), French Guiana (de Saint-Sernin & Dit Cosque, 2015), Guyana (Mentore, 2013), and Suriname (Kurmanaev, 2021), with significant diaspora demand in the United States (Rueb, 2015), Canada (Stabroek News, 2017), and the Netherlands (Gibson, 2023). Emerging evidence also indicates the expansion of trade corridors through Cuba (BirdsCaribbean, 2021). Taxa such as *Sporophila* finches, which hold high commercial value due to their use in competitive bird-singing traditions, are notably vulnerable (Gibson, 2023). The effectiveness of regulatory responses is compromised by limited enforcement capacities and complex cultural-economic contexts. Consequently, a transregional, multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to integrate scientific conservation methodologies with culturally informed outreach and robust coordination. Strategically positioned within these trade and conservation networks, the NSCG's geographic focus and multi-partner framework enable targeted interventions that advance the objectives outlined in both CITES and SPAW Protocols, addressing ecological threats while considering the socioeconomic dimensions of conservation in the region.

2. Threats to Songbirds in the Neotropics: Drivers of Decline and Barriers to Response

Neotropical songbirds provide crucial ecosystem services, including seed dispersal, pollination, and insect control, and sustain deeply rooted cultural practices such as household bird-keeping, festive releases, and competitive singing contests (de Man, 2024; IFAW, n.d.). These social and economic traditions create transboundary pressures that extend from source forests in northern South America to diaspora communities in North America and Europe. Recognising the complexity and interconnected nature of these threats, the NSCG targets not only species recovery but also addresses underlying systemic issues such as enforcement weaknesses, cultural influences, funding shortfalls, and data gaps. Currently, the NSCG has identified ten major and interconnected threats to Neotropical songbirds, which are outlined below:

1. *Illegal and Unsustainable Trade.* Illegal trade in songbirds is a significant driver of species decline. High-demand species, such as the chestnut-bellied seed-finch (*Sporophila angolensis*), are consistently trafficked from Guyana, Suriname, Brazil, and Venezuela, primarily transiting through Trinidad and Tobago to reach international markets in the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands (de Man, 2024; Gibson, 2023; Juergens et al., 2021; Mirin & Klinck, 2021). Field interviews indicate widespread local dependence on illicit trade, with extraction rates exceeding natural population replenishment in multiple locations. This unsustainable demand significantly stresses wild populations, limiting their reproductive recovery.

2. *Cruel and Inhumane Trapping and Transport Methods.* The methods employed to capture and transport songbirds greatly amplify mortality and stress. Birds are routinely trapped using mist nets, cage traps, and bird glue, methods that often result in serious harm, such as broken legs and wings (Gibson, 2023; Cullen, 2005; Neto et al., 2022). Birds are further kept under extreme conditions in tightly packed cages and containers, such as hair rollers, and smuggled over long distances via small boats, planes, or vehicles (Gibson, 2023; Macdonald, 2023). Mortality rates are generally high, exacerbating extraction rates and placing additional pressures on already vulnerable populations.

3. *Habitat Loss and Migratory Corridor Fragmentation.* Seed-finches (*Sporophila* spp.) are highly specialised grass-seed consumers and are severely affected by habitat loss due to the conversion of native grasslands into agricultural lands in countries such as Brazil (Silveira & Straube, 2008; Medolago et al., 2016). Additionally, they experience pressures from frequent human-caused fires and aerial pesticide applications associated with agriculture and cattle ranching in their habitats, exacerbating population declines (Ubaid et al., 2021; Machado et al., 2020). Although some seed-finch species show limited tolerance to habitat disturbance, illegal trade remains the primary driver of their decline (Silveira & Straube, 2008; Ubaid et al., 2018).

4. *Public Health and Zoonotic Risks.* Conditions within the illegal songbird trade, such as high-density holding areas, extended multi-stop transport routes, and commingling with domestic poultry, heighten risks of pathogen spill-over (Gibson, 2023; Suepaul et al., 2019). The discovery of a novel poxvirus in confiscated finches at Trinidadian ports exemplifies the potential for wildlife trade to introduce pathogens that threaten agriculture, wildlife, and public health (Suepaul et al., 2019). Such emerging diseases add additional layers of stress to both human communities and songbird populations, intensifying conservation challenges.

5. *Weak Enforcement and Regulatory Inconsistency.* Significant variability in penalties for identical wildlife offences across jurisdictions undermines effective deterrence of songbird trafficking (Verheij, 2019; de Man, 2024). Interviews reveal that very few bird-keepers possess valid permits as a result of unclear or stalled administrative

processes, which facilitates organised crime and disadvantages legitimate breeders (Gibson, 2023). Additionally, online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube increasingly facilitate trade and competitions, yet remain largely unregulated, creating blind spots for enforcement (Mirin & Klinck, 2021). These gaps place undue stress on enforcement personnel and regulatory frameworks.

6. *Cultural Normalisation of Wild Songbird Keeping*. In many countries in the Neotropics, the keeping and training of songbirds, particularly seed-finches (*Sporophila spp*.), is a well-established tradition, often linked to competitive singing contests and community identity (Gibson, 2023; Macdonald, 2023; Mirin & Klinck, 2021). For instance, in Suriname, the practice is rooted in Javanese cultural heritage brought by contract labourers during the late 19th century and remains an active part of community life today (Allen, 2011). In Cuba, the practice of catching and caging wild birds dates back to colonial Spanish rule and remains a widespread tradition (BirdsCaribbean, 2021). While these traditions carry important social and historical significance, they can complicate conservation when regulatory frameworks are unclear or inconsistently applied. Culturally informed approaches are therefore essential to support responsible songbird keeping.

7. *Inadequate Rehabilitation and Care Infrastructure.* Throughout the Neotropics, specifically South America and the Caribbean, few facilities meet international quarantine or veterinary standards necessary for effective wildlife rehabilitation. Consequently, large seizures rapidly overwhelm existing infrastructure, leading to high post-confiscation mortality (Gibson, 2023; Wyatt et al., 2022). This inadequacy undermines the credibility of enforcement, discourages future confiscation efforts, and places significant stress on the rehabilitative capacities and personnel tasked with animal care.

8. *Collapse of Dedicated Conservation Funding.* The recent and abrupt pause of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Species Conservation Catalyst Fund (SCCF) in early 2025 disrupted critical songbird conservation efforts across the Neotropics, including monitoring, captive breeding, and public outreach activities. More broadly, the global shift in US conservation funding priorities has left biodiversity-rich regions, such as the Caribbean and South America, increasingly under-resourced (Jones, 2025). As governments and civil society grapple with unfunded mandates and mounting ecological pressures, the loss of targeted support, such as the SCCF, has further strained operational capacity, threatening the continuity and effectiveness of songbird conservation efforts in the region.

9. *Lack of Baseline Ecological and Trade Data.* Many endemic or range-restricted neotropical songbird species remain poorly documented in international frameworks such as the IUCN Red List (Gibson, 2023). Additionally, seizure data is inconsistently

recorded and inadequately standardised, hindering evidence-based decision-making (Macdonald, 2023; Mirin & Klinck, 2021). This lack of reliable data stresses conservation planning and policy-making processes, complicating effective listing and enforcement actions under CITES and the SPAW Protocol.

10. *Climate-Related Stressors.* Increasing climate variability, manifested in more intense droughts, irregular rainfall patterns, and altered flowering and seeding cycles, negatively impacts songbird breeding success and survival (Mayor et al., 2017). These climate shifts concentrate bird populations into fewer suitable habitats and diminish available resources, further compounding pressures from habitat fragmentation and illegal trade.

Collectively, these interlinked threats underline the urgency and necessity for coordinated, transregional conservation strategies and targeted policy interventions. The NSCG strategically addresses these multifaceted challenges, directly aligning its interventions with conservation priorities identified under the SPAW Protocol and CITES.

3. Background and Evolution of the NSCG

Awareness of the crisis affecting neotropical songbirds predates both the NSCG and recent targeted investments, extending over half a century across multiple countries in the Neotropics. Since the mid-20th century, local observers, birdkeepers, researchers, and conservationists have expressed concern about declining songbird populations, particularly in relation to intensive trapping and cross-border trade.

In Trinidad and Tobago, early documentation of declines began to appear in bird-keeping publications by the mid-1960s. Articles lamented the reduced availability of chestnut-bellied seed-finches (*Sporophila angolensis*), explicitly linking scarcity to intensive trapping practices (ffrench, 1976). By the 1980s, local field observations from organisations such as the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club explicitly recognised significant reductions in the once common wild-caught songbird species, attributing these declines directly to unregulated extraction and trade pressures (Sookdeo, 2015; TTFNC, 1984).

In Brazil, parallel concerns emerged prominently during the 1970s through the 1990s. Ornithologists, such as Sick (1993), have reported the extensive extraction of Amazonian passerines for Brazil's internal pet trade, particularly in the Amazon and Pará regions. Despite this clear documentation, systemic enforcement responses remained limited, allowing the trade to persist and expand largely unchecked (do Nascimento et al., 2015).

Meanwhile, in Guyana and Suriname, communities have expressed that culturally significant "bird races" are increasingly relying on wild-caught birds, indicating growing extraction rates despite minimal formal monitoring (Gibson, 2023). Observers and researchers have consistently identified these two countries as key source locations in regional trade chains, despite sparse and

largely informal official documentation of these trends (Sinovas et al., 2017; Mirin & Klinck, 2021; Kurmanaev, 2021; Mentore, 2013).

Despite clear evidence of escalating threats, declines in neotropical songbirds have attracted limited international visibility and funding compared to similar conservation crises elsewhere, such as the Asian Songbird Crisis. Unlike the rapid response and sustained investment that prompted the formation of the IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG) in 2016 (IUCN SSC ASTSG, 2017), conservation efforts in the Neotropics were fragmented, inadequately funded, and lacked coordinated international attention. The absence of timely global intervention delayed the emergence of comprehensive, region-wide conservation strategies, resulting in persistent threats and ongoing declines in the populations of songbird species.

The establishment of the Songbird Catalyst Conservation Fund (SCCF) in 2024 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service briefly altered the conservation landscape, prioritising neotropical songbirds as an urgent and underserved issue (Macdonald, 2023). The SCCF strategically targeted species experiencing rapid population declines due to intensive trade pressure, compounded by a stark lack of regional enforcement coordination.

Under the SCCF initiative, seven projects were launched across the Neotropics in mid-2024 to address urgent gaps in songbird conservation. These projects aimed to map trafficking routes, develop diaspora-focused behaviour-change campaigns, strengthen cross-border enforcement, and enhance rehabilitation infrastructure in key source countries, including Guyana, Suriname, northern Brazil, and Trinidad and Tobago. International demand centres, including the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands, were also targeted for engagement. In January 2025, an in-person workshop held in Guyana brought together all grantees to develop a shared theory of change and lay the groundwork for coordinated action across the region.

However, a stop-work order issued later that month and just six months into implementation, brought all activities to an abrupt halt. The pause, triggered by shifting U.S. foreign aid priorities, left the initiative without time to generate measurable outcomes. The sudden pause of the SCCF programme halted ongoing activities, which has jeopardised critical datasets, disrupted developing partnerships, and placed previously funded initiatives at risk of collapse, thereby intensifying the urgency for alternative, sustainable funding and coordination mechanisms.

Recognising the critical need to sustain the momentum initiated by the SCCF, concerned stakeholders, primarily previously funded grantees comprising international and regional NGOs, researchers, and enforcement authorities, convened virtually in February 2025 to formally establish the Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group (NSCG) as a semi-formal consortium implemented by Sustainable Innovation Initiatives (SII), a US and Trinidad and Tobago-based nonprofit organisation. Inspired by the ASTSG framework but specifically adapted to the distinct ecological, social, and cultural contexts of the Neotropics, the NSCG aims to deliver sustained,

culturally sensitive, and scientifically informed conservation practices in response to the rapidly declining trade in songbirds.

While still in the process of formalisation, the Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group (NSCG) is intended to operate through a designated Coordinating Organisation and an overseeing Steering Committee. These bodies would guide thematic working groups focused on enforcement support, public engagement and behaviour change, legal and regulatory reform, and rehabilitation and welfare standards. The envisioned structure supports open membership, welcoming participation from academic institutions, grassroots organisations, diaspora networks, government wildlife authorities, and enforcement agencies. Once established, member entities will be formally aligned under a formal governance framework that promotes evidence-based conservation, cultural relevance, and strategic coherence with international frameworks such as CITES and the SPAW Protocol.

By creating a stable institutional structure to replace the temporary framework provided by the SCCF, the NSCG effectively moves the neotropical conservation community beyond reactive crisis management toward strategic, coordinated, and long-term solutions. The NSCG thereby positions stakeholders across the wider Caribbean and Neotropics to pursue sustained conservation and recovery efforts, ensuring protection for some of the most culturally and ecologically significant songbird species in the region.

4. Activities of the NSCG

At this stage of establishment, the NSCG has identified three catalytic projects that define its immediate work programme, each aligned with global and regional conservation frameworks to ensure strategic coherence, policy relevance, and operational effectiveness.

The first project focuses on launching and facilitating the NSCG by transforming the current informal network into a structured, operational alliance. This involves holding regular virtual meetings every two to four weeks to develop a comprehensive governance framework that clearly outlines structures, decision-making processes, and membership criteria. A key priority is establishing a formal Steering Committee and operational protocols for thematic working groups, which will enable consistent collaboration and transparent governance. Outreach efforts also aim to grow and diversify membership by inviting diaspora groups, NGOs, academic institutions, and other relevant stakeholders, thereby fostering an inclusive environment that respects cultural and linguistic diversity. These foundational efforts will support strategic fundraising, collaborative conservation action, and long-term growth.

The second project addresses the urgent need to secure funding for new and existing catalyst projects previously supported by the now-terminated USFWS SCCF. A dedicated fundraising working group will consolidate resource gaps across all affected projects and develop a unified fundraising strategy. This includes creating donor-ready pitch materials and identifying a broad range of potential funders, including philanthropic foundations, corporate social responsibility

programmes, diaspora benefactors, and government or intergovernmental grant sources. Coordination with the NSCG's digital outreach ensures that fundraising messages and donor recognition are integrated across all platforms, thereby strengthening donor relationships and enhancing visibility. By pooling resources, success stories, and data, the NSCG aims to rapidly bridge critical funding shortfalls, enabling the continuation and expansion of priority conservation interventions.

The third project is dedicated to developing and managing the NSCG's digital presence through a website, NeotropicalSongbirds.org. This initiative involves creating a cohesive style and branding guide, a distinctive logo, and a detailed persona to ensure that the website and associated content resonate with diverse audiences, including donors, NGOs, researchers, and diaspora communities. A password-protected beta version of the website is currently under active refinement, presenting key threats, ongoing projects, and opportunities for collaboration. Complementary communication assets, including fact sheets, newsletters, presentations, and social media campaigns, are also being developed to maintain consistent messaging and increase stakeholder engagement. In the future, ongoing monitoring of site analytics and user feedback will guide iterative improvements to enhance outreach effectiveness.

Together, these three catalytic projects provide a clear, coordinated pathway for the NSCG to formalise its governance, secure sustainable funding, and expand its visibility, laying a solid foundation for impactful and enduring neotropical songbird conservation across the region.

5. How the NSCG Benefits Parties to International Agreements for Biodiversity

The NSCG, while still in its formative stage, can provide significant benefits to Parties engaged with major international biodiversity agreements. By serving as a regional platform for knowledge exchange, advocacy, and collaborative action, the NSCG can help reduce duplication of efforts among range States, enabling them to more efficiently meet their obligations under key global and regional instruments. Specifically, the NSCG can coordinate scientifically robust efforts for the listing and protection of vulnerable songbird species under the relevant SPAW Protocol's Annexes, offering shared databases of field observations, seizure records, and legal analyses. These resources facilitate swift and effective compilation of proposals, streamlining the complex documentation required by SPAW's Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). Similarly, CITES authorities can benefit from NSCG-developed species summaries and non-detriment finding templates, which support timely reporting and the resolution of trade-related questions. By pooling knowledge across jurisdictions, the NSCG can enhance regional enforcement capabilities and promote legal harmonisation essential for effective wildlife crime mitigation.

In addition, the NSCG can directly support SPAW priorities by raising awareness of terrestrial biodiversity conservation, reinforcing animal welfare, and public health objectives within the Protocol's scope. This helps address the historical marine-centric focus of SPAW, demonstrating

the ecosystem interconnectivity between marine and terrestrial environments in the wider Caribbean. The NSCG also has the potential to foster inclusive, cross-sector dialogue by engaging government agencies, civil society organisations, academia, enforcement entities, and diaspora communities. This multi-stakeholder engagement can enrich evidence-based policy development and position the Caribbean as a hemispheric leader in tackling critical conservation challenges. By providing a neutral forum for pre-negotiation discussions, the NSCG can reduce transaction costs and enhance the region's collective diplomatic influence within global biodiversity fora.

Beyond SPAW and CITES, the NSCG can support Parties' alignment with other critical international frameworks by providing data, policy recommendations, and collaborative mechanisms that integrate into National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (CBD), inform migratory bird protections (CMS, IAC), enhance wetland management (Ramsar Convention), and contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially goals related to life on land, responsible consumption, and partnerships. Additionally, recognising the link between illegal songbird trade and organised crime, the NSCG can prepare stakeholders to engage with emerging wildlife-crime provisions under the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), promoting legal harmonisation, capacity-building, and intelligence sharing. Collectively, these capabilities position the NSCG to shorten the path from empirical evidence to policy action, raise the visibility of terrestrial species within traditionally marine-focused priorities, facilitate multi-stakeholder collaboration, and lay the foundation for sustained and strategic biodiversity conservation efforts.

6. How the SPAW Protocol Can Help Support the NSCG

The SPAW Protocol offers several practical mechanisms that can significantly advance the early operational stages of NSCG. These include:

1. *Collaborate on Regional Species Review.* The SPAW Regional Activity Centre (SPAW-RAC) can actively collaborate with NSCG researchers to undertake rapid, region-wide assessments of priority songbird species, including seed-finches, seedeaters, and tanagers, that are potential candidates for listing under the relevant SPAW Annexes. Inviting NSCG expertise into this structured technical review process immediately enriches assessments with current trade dynamics, enforcement insights, and nuanced cultural context not typically captured in national reporting alone. NSCG members, in turn, would gain direct access to SPAW's established technical guidelines, peer-review mechanisms, and extensive network of taxonomic experts. Such collaboration ensures that any resulting listing proposals are robust, scientifically rigorous, and aligned closely with SPAW criteria, facilitating a smooth reception by the Protocol's Parties.

2. *Facilitate Multi-Sector Engagement.* The SPAW Protocol can actively support the NSCG by embedding it within existing regional governance structures, fostering sustained

multi-sectoral dialogue and coordination. SPAW Parties could be encouraged to formally designate wildlife or customs focal points who actively participate in NSCG working groups and thematic consultations, creating direct channels between national priorities and regional discussions. Additionally, by promoting the participation of universities, enforcement training academies, and community organisations as observers in these NSCG sessions, SPAW would broaden knowledge-sharing without imposing significant new bureaucratic layers. Moreover, providing regular agenda items dedicated to NSCG updates at SPAW Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meetings, alongside concise NSCG progress reports at Conferences of Parties, would maintain consistent visibility and ensure that the collaborative's advocacy aligns seamlessly with broader SPAW Protocol objectives.

3. *Support Resource Mobilisation and Visibility.* Endorsement from the SPAW Protocol could significantly enhance the NSCG's credibility and attractiveness to multilateral funding bodies, philanthropic foundations, and corporate sponsors. Even modest public recognition, such as featuring the NSCG in SPAW Secretariat communications, newsletters, webpages, and official biennial reports, clearly signals to potential donors that the NSCG's work is regionally vetted, scientifically credible, and policy-relevant. Non-financial support, such as joint branding of webinars or providing formal letters of support for grant applications, further strengthens NSCG funding proposals by demonstrating explicit governmental and institutional backing. Collectively, these straightforward actions by SPAW would greatly enhance the NSCG's external profile, supporting resource mobilisation efforts critical for sustaining long-term conservation initiatives and coordinated enforcement actions across the Caribbean.

By leveraging SPAW's established governance channels, technical review capacities, and regional credibility, the NSCG can enhance its effectiveness in biodiversity conservation, enforcement collaboration, and resource mobilisation efforts. Overall, strategic procedural support and public recognition from the SPAW Protocol can provide the NSCG with both the technical foundation and the institutional credibility essential for its evolution into a stable, influential partner within the region's biodiversity governance landscape.

Conclusion

The rapid decline of neotropical songbirds presents severe risks to ecosystem integrity, cultural heritage, public health, and enforcement systems across the Neotropics. Without immediate and coordinated regional action, these ecological and socio-economic threats will persist, jeopardising both biodiversity and community resilience.

The NSCG offers a structured, inclusive, and actionable framework for addressing these critical conservation challenges through targeted interventions, knowledge sharing, and cross-sector collaboration. SPAW Parties are thus urged to actively engage with the NSCG, endorse and

participate in its scientifically rigorous species assessments, and leverage the existing governance channels of the SPAW Protocol to support and amplify the NSCG's leadership role in regional conservation. By strengthening collective efforts now, Parties can effectively safeguard the cultural and ecological heritage represented by neotropical songbirds, thereby achieving conservation success well-aligned with global biodiversity commitments.

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Annex A - Draft Recommendation on Neotropical Songbirds

Contracting Parties, particularly those with neotropical songbird management or trade concerns, are encouraged to recognise and support the Neotropical Songbirds Collaborative Group by: designating governmental focal points and technical experts to participate as appropriate; supporting the Group's formalisation and development of a governance framework; supporting the development and future implementation of a coordinated regional scientific review, working with national authorities and, as appropriate, SPAW-RAC, to identify neotropical songbird species for potential inclusion in SPAW Protocol Annexes; and mobilising financial and technical assistance for priority actions, including communications that highlight the urgency of neotropical songbird conservation to prospective donors.