



| Claude Jenkins, AWF Land Stewardship Biologist

RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative



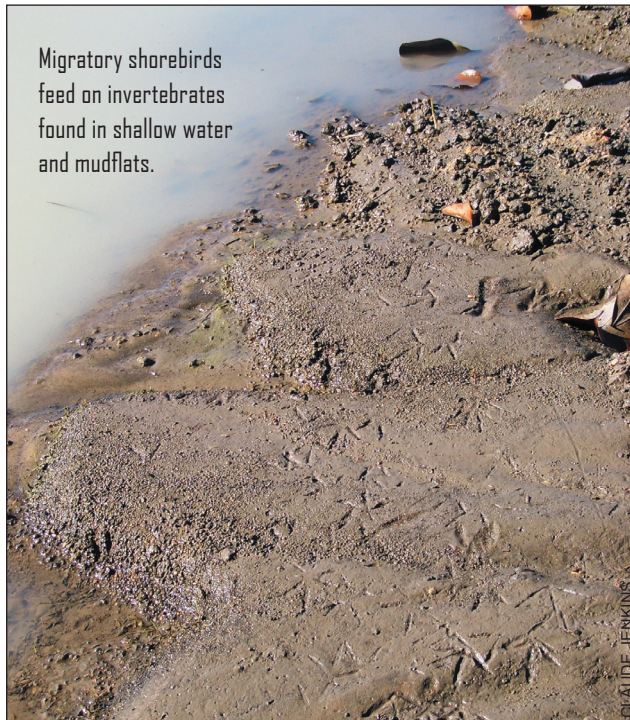
April 20, 2010 marked an opportunity for conservationists to respond to an environmental crisis that threatened wildlife that depend on the Gulf of Mexico. The crisis: the Deepwater Horizon oil spill! Oil began spewing from the drill site approximately 5,000 feet below the surface of the gulf, and although estimates vary, as much as 200,000 barrels per day were being released. Without doubt, this amount of oil being released into the gulf coupled with the uncertainty of when the leak would be stopped, posed a severe threat to wildlife and other coastal resources.

In response to the crisis, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) to provide habitat for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl on private lands to minimize the likelihood of birds coming into contact with or utilizing oil-impacted areas during their southward migration. Habitat created through the MBHI would provide valuable food resources for migratory birds and compensate for the loss of food associated with the oil spill. The MBHI was implemented in priority areas on private lands in eight states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas. The priority areas in Alabama included 23 counties, mostly in the southwest portion of the state, with Baldwin and Mobile counties considered high priority areas.

As with many large-scale habitat initiatives, partnerships were the key to successfully implementing the MBHI. Many agencies, conservation organizations, and individuals across the eight states committed resources to the initiative. Likewise, the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) partnered with the NRCS to insure effective delivery of the MBHI in Alabama. NRCS offered eligible landowners cost-share and technical assistance for the construction and maintenance of bird habitat, while AWF offered an additional \$250 per acre Practice Incentive Payment and technical assistance. AWF's Practice Incentive Payments were made possible through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) *Recovered Oil Fund for Wildlife*. The fund was created with proceeds from British

Petroleum's share of revenue from oil recovered from the spill, and was used to facilitate conservation activities in the gulf area.

I was deployed to Baldwin and Mobile counties from July 5 to August 6 where I worked closely with NRCS field personnel



Migratory shorebirds feed on invertebrates found in shallow water and mudflats.

and landowners to identify suitable sites for MBHI projects. The most ideal sites that we identified during the planning phase were agricultural sites, primarily rowcrop fields; however, it wasn't until the "boots hit the ground" that we realized that there were obstacles to implementing the MBHI on agricultural sites. For example, agriculture producers would have to forfeit base payments on acres taken out of production and enrolled in the MBHI, making the MBHI and rowcrop agriculture non-compatible. Also, many non-agriculture sites that were being offered up by landowners were not suitable. Indeed, implementation of the MBHI was a challenge! However, AWF and NRCS demonstrated incredible resolve despite the challenges, and by the

end of the project period, Alabama landowners had committed over 700 acres to the MBHI!

Suzanne Sessine, NFWF's Assistant Director at the Eastern Partnership Office, and I got a chance to visit some of the projects in early November. We first met with NRCS District Conservationist Joey Koptis to look at projects in Baldwin County. Projects ranged from completion with shorebirds and waterfowl to under construction. I spent the rest of the day visiting MBHI projects in Mobile County with District Conservationist Joyce Nicholas and Soil Conservation Technician Marshall Colburn. Like Baldwin County, projects ranged from completion to under construction, and I was pleased to observe shorebirds utilizing the completed projects.

It was gratifying to see conservationists respond to an environmental crisis that threatened our coastal resources, and it was gratifying to work in partnership with NFWF, NRCS, and Alabama landowners to implement the MBHI! Working closely with these partners to create habitat for migratory birds in face of an environmental crisis was truly one of my most gratifying experiences as a conservation professional! 🐦