



# LOUISIANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

*The voice of Louisiana's wildlife and natural resources since 1940.*

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June 16, 2023

Dr. Rob Clay, Director  
WHSRN Executive Office  
Asunción, Paraguay  
c/o Manomet, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1770  
Manomet, MA 02345

**RE: Support for Chandeleur Islands Nomination as a Site of Hemispheric Importance within the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN)**

Dear Dr. Clay,

Louisiana Wildlife Federation (LWF) proudly supports the nomination of the Chandeleur Islands as a Site of Hemispheric Importance within the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) and submits the following comments to highlight the importance of this site as a worthy addition to the network.

LWF supports science-based conservation throughout Louisiana. The remaining barrier islands off the state's coast are a critical line of defense to protect inland communities from storm surge and protect the fragile interior marshes of the Louisiana coast. The Chandeleur Islands is a well-studied barrier island complex in the north-central Gulf of Mexico. Once spanning over 11,000 acres, only about 10% of that area remains. Even so, this barrier island chain serves as important habitat for both people and wildlife and would greatly benefit from the increased awareness, funding, and collaboration of future conservation efforts that WHSRN recognition could bring.

The Chandeleur Islands provide key habitats for a host of wildlife species. The islands serve as an important sanctuary for 23 species of seabirds and shorebirds and provide habitat for many other federally threatened and endangered species or other conservation priority designation, including loggerhead, green, and Kemp's ridley sea turtles, the West Indian manatee, and lemon sharks. The surrounding waters are also a haven for fishing enthusiasts in pursuit of speckled trout, redfish, and flounder. The islands also protect other habitats behind the island such as marine seagrass beds in Chandeleur Sound and oysters in the Biloxi Marsh. The Chandeurs are designated as critical habitat for the federally threatened piping plover and surveys suggest they may also winter the largest population of federally threatened red knots in the entire Gulf.

Multiple local, state, and federal entities play a role in the conservation of Louisiana's barrier island system. Louisiana's barrier islands are important foraging, loafing, breeding, and nesting habitat for migratory shorebirds and colonial nesting waterbirds. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' Wildlife Action Plan listed the following shorebirds as Species of Conservation Concern in Louisiana: the snowy plover, Wilson's plover, piping plover, American oystercatcher, marbled godwit, dunlin, short-billed dowitcher, and American woodcock. The Chandeleur Islands support one of the highest breeding densities of Wilson's plover on the Gulf Coast. According to Birdlife International's State of the Birds report, State Wildlife Action Plans currently receive less than 5% of the required funding needed for successful implementation.

The condition of the state's coastal and barrier island beaches is listed as a primary concern for the above-mentioned species in the state's Wildlife Action Plan. The snowy plover, Wilson's plover, and American oystercatcher are listed as "critically imperiled" while the piping plover (placed on the Federal Endangered Species List in 1986), which does not breed in Louisiana, but spends many months of each year along Louisiana beaches, has been listed as "imperiled".

The Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) formed in 2005 to address recovery issues following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. CPRA's mandate is to develop, implement, and enforce a comprehensive coastal protection and restoration Master Plan. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the islands, removing over 90% of the sand, exposing backbarrier marshes to Gulf wave attack. These islands were also some of the most impacted areas as a result of the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* ("BP") oil disaster. Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan has maintained bipartisan support and unanimous passage from the Louisiana Legislature. A key component of that plan is rebuilding the state's barrier island systems.

Included in the Coastal Master Plan is the Chandeleur Islands Restoration project. In summer 2022, CPRA and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) monitored the Chandeleur Islands to inform a restoration strategy and project design for the islands. The *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill heavily oiled the Chandeleur Islands, causing many bird and aquatic species that inhabited the islands to suffer. While it had long been presumed that the Chandeleur Islands were no longer suitable for nesting sea turtles, in July 2022, CPRA and LDWF discovered 53 sea turtle crawls, including Kemp's ridley turtle hatchlings. This was the first time Kemp's ridley hatchlings, the most endangered sea turtles in the world, have been observed on the island in over 75 years. This highly profiled news brings added attention to the need for and importance of conservation of the Chandeleur Islands, of which shorebirds will also benefit.

While Louisiana's coastal plan is updated every six years to incorporate the best available science and landscape changes, it is not a fully funded plan. The changing nature of barrier islands means that while restoration may happen in a certain year, adaptive management and maintenance measures are always needed to continue protecting these critical habitats. Securing future funding will be critical. LWF hopes that the inclusion of the Chandeleur Islands in the WHSRN could bring additional attention and funding for entities working diligently to maintain the islands' integrity in a future that will include rising seas and more severe storms.

Long before Louisiana had a coastal master plan, however, the Chandeleur Islands gained national attention (and protection) thanks to President Teddy Roosevelt. In 1904, he named the Breton Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) – which includes North Breton Island and all of the Chandeleur Islands – as the second such refuge in the nation. In fact, Breton Island is the only refuge that Roosevelt ever visited. The Audubon Society and Birdlife International have named the Breton NWR as an Important Bird Area. The islands of Breton NWR (with the exception for North Breton Island) were designated as the Breton Wilderness — part of the National Wilderness Preservation System – in 1975. As such, the islands are managed to retain their relatively wild nature. Indeed, designated wilderness areas are the most protected public lands in the country. Only about 5% of the country is protected as wilderness (with half of that total in Alaska alone), which highlights just how important this area is for wildlife. The refuge provides important habitat for colonies of nesting wading birds and seabirds, as well as wintering shorebirds and waterfowl including endangered and threatened species such as the brown pelican, least tern, and piping plover.

Louisiana Wildlife Federation is a member of the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) Management Council. BTNEP and its partners including the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority have done work to assess populations of both nesting shorebirds and, in some cases, wintering shorebirds across coastal Louisiana. In 2017, research on the *rufa* Red Knot began in Louisiana when BTNEP partnered with Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program. The surveys conducted at the Chandeleur Islands along with banding and resight efforts in Grand Isle, Elmer's Isle and the Caminada Headland provide data to support site nomination for the Chandeleur Islands as a Site of Hemispheric Importance.

The Southeast Conservation Blueprint is a living, spatial plan that identifies priority areas for a connected network of lands and waters across the Southeast and Caribbean. Large parts of the Chandeleur and Breton Islands are now recognized as "highest priority", meaning the top 10% across the Southeast and is where conservation action would make the biggest impact, based on a suite of natural and cultural resource indicators.

Currently, the WHSRN does not include any categorical site in Louisiana - be it landscape/ regional/hemispheric/international, though it has identified the Chandeleur Islands as a critically important wintering site. Furthermore, the network lacks a Site of Hemispheric Importance around the Gulf of Mexico. Currently, the only sites along the Gulf Coast in the WHSRN are five Sites of International Importance located in Texas and Mexico. Coastal Louisiana serves as a critical stopover for many shorebird species both during fall migration before the long open-ocean journey to South America and as the first stop in North America on their returning flight. Over half a million shorebirds depend on Louisiana's wetlands along their migratory journey across the Midcontinental Flyway of the Americas while other species stay in Louisiana to breed or overwinter. The Chandeleur Islands are a fitting addition as a key site to protect shorebirds and their habitats through the WHSRN.

In 2015, Manomet held workshops which led to shorebirds becoming a state priority for the Natural Resources Conservation Service with the Working Lands for Wildlife Shorebirds of Louisiana Wetlands program. The inclusion of the Chandeleur Islands in the WHSRN could lead to successful collaborations on an even larger scale to further increase conservation support for shorebirds in Louisiana, with benefits extending well beyond state lines and national borders.

Louisiana Wildlife Federation is a statewide, nonprofit organization that represents 19 affiliate organizations and more than 8,000 members dedicated to the conservation of Louisiana's wildlife and natural resources. Should you have any questions, I can be reached at 337-351-3973 or [stacy@lawildlifefed.org](mailto:stacy@lawildlifefed.org). Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Sincerely,



Stacy Ortego  
Coastal Policy Manager