

We Should Be Alarmed by the Staggering Decline of Birds

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Worldwide, 1 in 8 bird species is at risk of extinction
- › Another 223 bird species are critically endangered and could disappear from the planet
- › A net loss of 2.9 billion birds, or 29%, occurred in the U.S. and Canada since 1970
- › Industrial agriculture, with its rapid expansion and use of toxic chemicals, is driving bird losses the world over and represents the greatest threat to birds
- › Birds are a crucial element of our ecosystem, controlling pests, spreading seeds and pollinating about 5% of plants that humans use for food and medicine

Worldwide, 1 in 8 bird species is at risk of extinction.¹ We should be very concerned, since, as BirdLife International notes, “Birds are our early warning system.”² Declines in bird populations signal that something serious is happening in the environment — habitats are being destroyed, chemical pesticides are taking a toll on wildlife and more.

Already, 223 bird species are critically endangered³ and could disappear from the planet — a loss that would cut deeply. BirdLife explains:⁴

“Birds have the power to unite people. Many species migrate vast distances, motivating nations to work together to protect them every step of the way. In this way, birds show us the levels of global cooperation needed to tackle the ... extinction crises in coming years. More simply than that, a love of birds is something we can all share, regardless of our differences.”

Imagining a world without birds isn't only about missing their visual beauty and melodic songs. Birds are a crucial element of our ecosystem, controlling pests, spreading seeds and pollinating about 5% of plants that humans use for food and medicine.⁵ So, a loss of birds should sound alarm bells for every one of us.

"Birds tell us about the health of our natural environment – we ignore their messages at our peril," says Patricia Zurita, BirdLife's CEO.⁶

3 Billion North American Birds Gone in 50 Years

The situation is dire for many bird species, including the black-tailed godwit, a large shorebird with long legs and an equally long bill. Wired interviewed Alice Cerutti, whose 115-hectare (about 284-acre) rice farm in Italy is the country's last known regular nesting site for the species:⁷

"During the past decade or so, she and her family have planted thousands of trees, reestablished wetlands, and brought in experts to help study and manage the precious birds that nest in areas Cerutti has set aside for wildlife. It seems to be working. 'We have this amazing and big responsibility,' Cerutti says ... Local researchers found the bird clinging on there even as it disappeared from other locations."

It's a story of hope among an otherwise dismal outlook. A net loss of 2.9 billion birds, or 29%, occurred in the U.S. and Canada since 1970,⁸ including not only rare species but also common birds at backyard feeders, such as sparrows, warblers, finches and blackbirds.⁹ Writing in the journal *Science*, researchers and colleagues with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology explained:¹⁰

"Integration of range-wide population trajectories and size estimates indicates a net loss approaching 3 billion birds ... A continent-wide weather radar network also reveals a similarly steep decline in biomass passage of migrating birds over a recent 10-year period. This loss of bird abundance signals an urgent

need to address threats to avert future avifaunal collapse and associated loss of ecosystem integrity, function, and services."

Nineteen common bird species lost more than 50 million birds during the study period, with lead author and conservation scientist Ken Rosenberg told CBS News, "There's an erosion of the numbers of common birds." "We expected to see continuing declines of threatened species," he said. "But for the first time, the results also showed pervasive losses among common birds across all habitats, including backyard birds."¹¹

Birds Declining Throughout Europe

It's not only North American birds that are in peril. "A further 600 million have been lost in the European Union since 1980, an area five times smaller," Bird Life International reported.¹² There are about 10,000 species of birds worldwide, and half are declining in numbers.¹³ In Great Britain, 73 million birds have disappeared since 1970, a decline of nearly one-third.

As in the U.S., birds affected included both common and rare species, including a loss of nearly 30 million house sparrows, 20 million starlings, 4 million skylarks and 2 million blackbirds. According to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which conducted the research:¹⁴

"The estimated losses actually total 114 million individuals (or 57 million breeding pairs). The losses are masked in part by increases in certain other species, including some familiar residents (e.g. Wren, Woodpigeon and Blackcap), and new arrivals (e.g. Little Egret and Cetti's Warbler).

The growing numbers of these species, which result in gains of c. 41 million individuals, do not compensate for the extraordinary losses overall, resulting in a net loss of 73 million individuals."

European mountain birds are also disappearing. Researchers with BTO and colleagues revealed a 7% population decline in 44 bird species monitored from 2002 to 2014.¹⁵

Changes in human land use, including grazing pressure and afforestation, may be partly to blame.

European birds that eat insects, known as insectivores, represent another category in trouble, with insectivorous bird populations declining 13% across Europe and 28% in Denmark from 1990 to 2015 or 2016, respectively. “Our findings suggest that the decline of insectivores is primarily associated with agricultural intensification and loss of grassland habitat,” researchers explained.¹⁶

We’ve Already Lost 94% of Some Bird Species

BirdLife International’s State of the World’s Bird report is published every four years, most recently in 2022.¹⁷ Along with the 1,409 bird species threatened with extinction, the report found that only 6% of species have populations that are increasing.

Over the last 500 years, meanwhile, more than 160 bird species have been eliminated. Now the rate of extinction is accelerating, says Lucy Haskell, science officer for BirdLife.¹⁸ According to a news release for the report:¹⁹

“Although long-term population data is far more comprehensive for species in these regions [North America and the European Union], signs point to similar catastrophic declines elsewhere across the globe.

For instance, since 1850, forest and wetland specialist species in Japan are estimated to have declined by a staggering 94 and 88 percent respectively, while populations of Kenya’s raptor species have declined on average by nearly three quarters since 1970.”

Industrial Agriculture Is the Leading Threat to Birds

Industrial agriculture, with its rapid expansion and use of toxic chemicals, is driving bird losses the world over and represents the greatest threat to birds. BirdLife’s report stated:²⁰

“Across the world, birds are impacted by an array of different threats, nearly all of which are caused by human actions. Agriculture – both through its expansion into important habitats and the increasing use of machinery and chemicals as it intensifies – is the leading threat to bird species, impacting at least 73 percent of threatened species.”

A study by Environment Canada suggested agricultural pesticides alone may lead to 2.7 million bird losses there annually.²¹ It's also been shown that birds exposed to widely used neurotoxic pesticides called neonicotinoids feed less, accumulate less body mass and fat stores and ultimately delay migration, which can affect survival and reproduction.²²

Habitat loss and habitat degradation are also problematic.²³ Habitat loss refers to instances when land is converted for other uses, such as agriculture or development. When habitat is degraded, it may not disappear entirely but becomes altered, fragmented or compromised in a way that makes it less able to support bird life. Due to agricultural intensification, habitat essential to birds is rapidly disappearing. BirdLife explained:²⁴

“In Europe, this has resulted in an over 50 percent decline in abundance of the continent’s farmland birds since 1980 and, further south, the conversion of grasslands to croplands has resulted in an 80 percent decline in the population of the Liben Lark (Critically Endangered) in just 15 years.”

Meanwhile, logging is another serious threat. “Over 7 million hectares (17,297,376.7 acres) of forest are lost every year – an area larger than the Republic of Ireland – and this impacts nearly half of the world’s threatened bird species,” BirdLife added.²⁵

This includes the Harpy Eagle, which depends on old-growth trees – 90% of which are targeted by logging in the rainforests of South America.²⁶ Aside from habitat loss and pesticide usage, some of the additional human-caused threats to birds include:²⁷

Cats

Window collisions

Vehicles

Power lines

Communication towers

Wind turbines

Still, many are taking action toward positive change. Wired reported that on Cerutti's farm, she's taken steps to avoid pesticides that are so toxic to birds:²⁸

"Cerutti has dispensed with pesticides and allowed vegetation in wetland areas to regrow. Besides the black-tailed godwits, there are bitterns and lapwings – both also in decline.

And no, she doesn't make as much money as she might if she were driven to maximize profits on the same tract of land. It doesn't matter. 'Not every farmer can do what we're doing, but I think that it's important to do something,' she says. A neighbor was recently inspired by Cerutti's efforts to stop spraying places that border her farm with glyphosate, an incredibly potent herbicide. 'I think it's a great step,' says Cerutti."

What Do We Lose if Birds Disappear?

Birds play a vital role globally, helping to pollinate plants and disperse seeds while acting as both scavengers and predators. But, humans' connection to birds runs even deeper. It's revealing that, in the U.K., more than 1.3 million people belong to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which is more than the members of all the country's political parties combined.

And in the U.S., birdwatching is a favorite hobby for more than 70 million people,²⁹ while birders can be found worldwide, making a habit of seeking out different bird species whenever they can. Encounters with birds involve both sight and sound, providing complex, multisensory experiences. Interactions with birds in your everyday life may be enough to compel lasting change to your mood.³⁰

The presence of birdsongs also enhances the mental benefits of spending time in nature.³¹ Birdsongs, in particular, may be appreciated by humans because birds have been around throughout evolution. Singing birds are also often heard in spring and summer, indicating forthcoming or current pleasant weather.³² All of this could be lost if changes aren't made to protect these vulnerable creatures.

7 Simple Steps to Help Birds

The light at the end of the tunnel is regenerative agriculture, which is a savior to birds, insects and other species worldwide. The best course of action to reduce the harm of industrial agriculture and habitat loss is having on birds is to support biodynamic, grass fed farms that are conserving diversity and not relying on synthetic chemicals and other intensive agriculture practices that harm birds and other wildlife.

Meanwhile, we can all get involved to help make the world a safer place for birds. 3 Billion Birds, a partnership between Audubon, American Bird Conservancy, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Georgetown Environment Initiative, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Smithsonian, suggests everyone take the following seven actions to help birds now, before their populations decline even further:³³

- 1. Make windows safer** — Install screens or break up reflections using film, paint or string to prevent birds from hitting your windows.
- 2. Keep cats indoors** — Free-roaming cats kill birds; give your cat environmental enrichment by providing a catio, a secure outdoor enclosure where your cat can enjoy the outdoors without harming birds.
- 3. Reduce your lawn, plant native plants instead** — Lawns do little to support birds, while native plants sustain birds and provide shelter and nesting areas.
- 4. Avoid pesticides** — They're toxic to birds and reduce insects, which birds rely on for food; avoid using pesticides in your home and garden and choose organic or biodynamic food produced without pesticides.

5. **Choose shade-grown coffee** – Sun-grown coffee contributes to forest destruction and requires pesticides and fertilizers; shade-grown coffee preserves forests and helps migratory birds survive the winter.
6. **Avoid plastic** – Plastic is polluting oceans and harming wildlife, including seabirds; avoid all forms of single-use plastics, including bags, bottles, straws, disposable utensils and wraps.
7. **Watch birds and share** – Monitoring birds is important to protect them. According to 3 Billion Birds, “The world’s most abundant bird, the Passenger Pigeon, went extinct, and people didn’t realize how quickly it was vanishing until it was too late.”³⁴

Researchers need help from citizen scientists to monitor birds in their own communities and report on what they see. A number of projects are underway, including eBird, Project FeederWatch and a Christmas Bird Count, so you can get involved watching birds in your own backyard.

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