

Where Have All the Birds Gone?

According to the 2014 “State of the Birds” report, populations of birds living on prairies, deserts, and at sea have declined between 30 and 40 percent, in the last 40 years; nearly one-third of U.S. birds are endangered, threatened, or in significant decline (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, 2014). Conservationists and government agencies continue to blame outdoor cats as a major cause for the decline in bird and wildlife populations, despite the fact that national and world reports clearly conclude that human activity is the true culprit. As we approach the planet’s sixth mass extinction event, scientists warn that human activity is the driving force behind this current state. Conversely, previous mass extinction events were caused by natural planetary transformations or catastrophic asteroid strikes. In the past 35 years, the human population has doubled, and it is projected to reach over 8 billion by the year 2030 (“Population Growth,” accessed 2015).

“More than 6.8 billion human beings are now demanding ever greater quantities of material resources, decimating the world’s richest ecosystems, and dumping billions of tons of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere each year,”

“According to a 2000 study published by a global alliance of conservation organizations called BirdLife International, almost 1,200 species — about 12 percent of the world’s remaining bird species — may face extinction within the next century.”

-Worldwatch Institute,
“Winged Messengers” (2003)

concludes the 2010 “State of the World” report published by the Worldwatch Institute. And even despite a significant increase in our resource efficiency, “global resource use has expanded 50 percent over the past three decades” (Worldwatch Institute, 2010). Human activity such as habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and the use of toxic chemicals, is the cause of declining bird and wildlife populations ... not cats.

Habitat Loss, Climate Change, Pollution, and Pesticides

The 2013 “State of the Birds” report says the primary cause of declining bird populations is due to habitat loss, agri-

cultural expansion, climate change, and pollution (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, 2013). The survival of migrating birds highly depends on the planet's forests. Without available tracts of forestland, countless bird populations lose their nesting sites and food sources. Songbirds use these forests to fly back and forth with the changing seasons, returning every year to the same areas to lay their eggs and raise their young; however, more and more of these birds find themselves returning to sites where forestland has been bulldozed, leaving them with little to no available resources for survival.

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs says, "experts estimate that each minute, 11 football fields of forest are cleared." What is truly frightening about this figure is how world governments continue to support such actions.

With all the environmental and ecological consequences, one must question the motives of not only the Brazilian government [referring to clearing the Amazon rainforest], which has tolerated such a destructive development model, but also its endorsement by the international community which has jeopardized the future of mankind. (COHA, 2009)

With this tragic rate of clear cutting of forestland and the rapidly growing sprawl of cityscapes, habitat destruction is obviously the number one reason for declining bird populations, as well as other wildlife. Professor of biology at

Stanford University, Rodolfo Dirzo says, "We tend to think about extinction as loss of a species from the face of Earth, and that's very important, but there's a loss of critical ecosystem functioning in which animals play a central role that we need to pay attention to as well" (Carey, 2014). All animal and plant species on this planet are connected; the loss of any one species can affect an entire ecosystem, sending out a ripple effect to surrounding environments.

"The global environmental crisis has caught up with migratory birds. There are simply too many people making ever increasing demands on a fixed supply of resources. It is inconceivable that we can continue on the same reckless path for very long."

-John Terborgh, "Why American Songbirds are Vanishing" (1992)

One of the major driving factors behind deforestation, besides the reliance on paper products, is the increased consumption of animal products. According to a 2006 U.N. report, "Livestock now use 30 per cent of the earth's entire land surface." Animal agriculture has been turning lush forests and grassy prairies into barren deserts since the beginning of human history, but thanks to the advent of factory farming in the 1950s, this pace has exploded dramatically. It is hard to believe that much of North America was once covered by luscious forest, seeing as how today that land is home to livestock production. The devastation of clear-cut-

ting forest for animal agriculture is now continuing in Latin America, especially the Amazon River Basin, where 70 percent of forestland has been turned into pastures for livestock grazing (United Nations, 2006).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2014) says, “greenhouse gas data show that emissions from agriculture, forestry and fisheries have nearly doubled over the past fifty years and could increase an additional 30 percent by 2050 ...”

Raising animals for food also contributes substantially to global warming and is responsible for more water pollution, topsoil depletion, and wildlife destruction than any other human activity. Senior U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization official Henning Steinfeld reported that “Livestock are one of the most significant contributors to today’s most serious environmental problems. Urgent action is required to remedy the situation” (United Nations, 2006). Raising animals for food is one of the largest sources of carbon dioxide and the single largest source of both methane and nitrous oxide emissions (EPA, accessed 2015). “Livestock and their byproducts account for at least 32,000 million tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per year, or 51% of all worldwide greenhouse gas emissions” (Goodland and Anhang, 2009).

Along with deforestation and global warming, birds are also in decline due to increased air, water, and soil pollution

and the use of toxic chemicals. Again, the major contributor to both of these problems is animal agriculture. In 1997, the USDA estimated that animals raised for food produced 1.4 billion tons of waste, which is 130 times the nation’s volume of human waste, or five tons of animal waste for every U.S. citizen (Horrigan et al., 2002). The waste, containing vast amounts of nitrates, pathogens, and hormones, winds up in the air, the water, and the soil. Air pollution causes respiratory problems, and water pollution kills large portions of marine life either directly or through formations of algal blooms; decreased marine life is bad news for birds, especially seabirds who rely on fish and other aquatic life for food.

The use of toxic chemicals such as pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and fertilizers poses a severe risk to birds, killing them directly or by causing decreased breeding success, physical malformations, or impaired ability to migrate or to avoid predators. Globally, the U.S. uses one-fifth of the five billion pounds of pesticides used each year, with the agricultural sector accounting for the majority of that use (Grube et. al, 2011). The application of pesticides and fertilizers on the estimated 14,136 golf courses worldwide, adds to the problem. On average, each golf course uses around 150 acres of land, with each acre being treated with 18 pounds of pesticides annually (Cox, 1991). In the 1991 *Journal Of Pesticide Reform*, Caroline Cox writes:

Is ‘an oasis of burbling creeks, swaying trees, and rolling seas of shimmering

green' an appropriate description of a golf course? Or would 'a toxic waste dump, a destroyer of wetlands, and a misuse of farmland and water' be more correct? What does pesticide use on golf courses mean for golfers, nearby residents, wildlife, and the environment in general?

According to reports since 1971, because of "exposure to the organophosphate insecticides diazinon, chlorpyrifos, and isofenphos, blackbirds, blue jays, Brant and Canada geese, coots, grackles, gulls, mallards, robins, starlings, and widgeons have all been killed on golf courses" (Cox, 1991).



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Cats are talented tree climbers and love to be up high, yet prey primarily upon ground dwelling animals like rodents.

A 2013 study led by Canadian toxicologist Dr. Pierre Mineau identifies acutely toxic pesticides as the most likely leading cause of the widespread decline in grass-

land bird numbers in the U.S. (Mineau and Whiteside, 2013). The indirect effects of pesticides mediated through a loss of insects as a food resource also takes a toll on birds, while eagles, owls and hawks accumulate high chemical concentrations in their bodies from ingesting poisoned prey; farmers poison any animal viewed as a threat to their operation, including rodents, rabbits, and foxes. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to find any place on the planet where chemical residues are not detectable.

Windows, Communication Towers, Power lines, and Wind Turbines

Millions of birds, worldwide, die each year when they collide with man-made structures, like glass windows and buildings, communication towers, power lines, and wind turbines. Ornithologists estimate that between 100 million and 1 billion birds are killed each year from building strikes, particularly with windows (Loss et. al, 2014). Birds simply cannot differentiate a reflection from reality. Even if a bird flies away after striking a window, she may die later as a result of internal injuries.

Communication towers (radio, television, cellular) are very tall structures usually located on elevated land, and their supporting guy wires are extremely dangerous for migratory birds. Fast fly-

ing birds do not see these loose wires and birds who are not very agile have difficulties avoiding them. Scientists estimate that 6.8 million birds are killed every year in the U.S. and Canada due to flying into communication towers (Longcore et. al, 2012). Collisions with power lines are estimated to kill up to 175 million birds annually, with tens to hundreds of thousands more birds being electrocuted (Manville, 2005).

Although wind turbines are an important form of clean technology for renewable energy production and an important tool in combating climate change, they can be dangerous for migratory birds. Their blades rotate at speeds of up to 200 kilometers per hour and, when placed along the major migratory routes of birds, like coastlines and mountaintops, wind turbines can become obstacles for birds causing both injuries and fatalities. It is estimated that 573,000 birds are killed every year in the U.S. from collisions with wind turbines (Smallwood, 2013).

Other Causes Contributing to Declining Bird Populations

Although the above mentioned issues are the main culprits of declining bird populations, other important factors also play a significant role and should be taken into consideration. According to newly released data, the federal Wildlife Services, a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), killed more than 2.7

million animals during fiscal year 2014; nearly 60 percent of animals killed were birds, including bald and golden eagles, blackbirds, bluebirds, cardinals, cormorants, cranes, doves, ducks, egrets, falcons, finches, geese, hawks, herons, ibises, meadowlarks, ospreys, owls, pelicans, ravens, robins, sparrows, swallows, wild turkeys, vultures, and woodpeckers, just to name a few (USDA, 2015). Along with birds, numerous other animals (including 300+ mountain lions and nearly 800 bobcats; 700+ feral cats; 16 pet dogs), are killed intentionally or unintentionally every year by the government to protect powerful agricultural, livestock, and other special interests. Since 1996, our country's Wildlife Services has shot, poisoned, and snared more than 27 million animals. "It's sickening to see these staggering numbers and to know that so many of these animals were cut down by aerial snipers, deadly poisons and traps," said Amy Atwood, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity in a press release (Center for Biological Diversity, 2015).

"Human-related factors threaten 99 percent of the most imperiled bird species, and bird extinctions already far exceed the natural rate of loss. At least 128 species have vanished over the past 500 years, 103 of them since 1800."

-Worldwatch Institute,
"Winged Messengers" (2003)

The 2014 "State of the Birds" report says that one of the main causes of declining sea birds is oil spills, while some popula-

tions of birds are in decline because of oil and natural gas extractions. The report also cites mountaintop coal mining as a contributing factor, for entire mountain peaks of forestland are cleared to extract mineral resources (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, 2014).

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It is best to rise above the “sticky numbers” and sloppy statistics, and work toward humane solutions for feral cat management.

Longline fishing is another danger to birds, which claims hundreds of thousands of seabird lives every year, when birds are inadvertently hooked on baited lines and drowned. Sadly, at least 23 species face extinction from this industry. The Worldwatch Institute reports, “more than 30 countries have longline fleets, yet little has been done to address the problem despite findings that simple mitigation measures can drastically cut bird bycatch” (Youth, 2003).

Humans also exploit birds through hunting and the pet trade industry. Poorly regulated or illegal hunting and capture contributes to the killing of millions of birds. In nations such as Malta and China, “deep-forest birds such as Neo-

tropical curassows and Asian pheasants quickly disappear when hunters invade pristine areas” (Youth, 2003). If birds are not being hunted, then they are being captured and sold into the exotic pet trade. “A third of the world’s 330 parrot species are threatened with extinction due to pressures from collecting for the pet trade, combined with habitat loss” (Youth, 2003).

Some Bird Populations are on the Rise

Even though birds may be killed by cats and other predators, many experts have said repeatedly that this does not mean the birds preyed upon are declining in number. In fact, although some songbird populations are declining, other bird populations such as blackbirds, greenfinches, blue jays, and brown-headed cowbirds are exploding. Many birds have been faring well in the U.S., especially birds living in urban environments. “Birds are increasing and that’s good,” said Kevin McGowan of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (Bryner, 2009).

The 2009 “State of the Birds” report states, “The urban/suburban indicator, based on data for 114 native bird species, shows a steady, strong increase during the past 40 years.” The report continues on to say:

American Robins can thrive in many habitats, including lawns with abundant earthworms. California Quail and Abert’s Towhees find suburban

plantings a suitable substitute for native aridland habitats. Gulls, vultures, and crows seek abundant food at garbage dumps and along roadsides. Hummingbirds, chickadees, sparrows, finches, woodpeckers, and other birds take advantage of bird feeders. Even hawks and owls find increasingly safe nesting sites and abundant prey in our towns and cities. (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, 2009)

So while reports indicate a decline in some bird populations (mostly songbirds who migrate and depend on forestland), those species who take up residence in urban and city landscapes are increasing in numbers. These birds find nesting sites in tall buildings and backyard sanctuaries. They scavenge through human garbage and frequent garden bird feeders. Ironically, the highest concentration of feral cats can also be found in these same landscapes; most cats tend to congregate in cities and urban areas because more people live there, and because that is where food and shelter is most available. If bird populations are rising in our cities and urban areas, while living alongside feral cats, then how can conservationists blame cats for their demise?

Conclusion

At this time in history, when the burgeoning human population is causing so much destruction to the Earth, we need to remind ourselves of our species' responsibility and consider our *double*

standards. We often excuse or ignore the devastation done to the environment by humans and the results of this destruction to the wildlife we share this planet with. Urban sprawl, shopping malls, roads, golf courses, and most of all, the use of harmful pesticides, all play a part in reducing habitat and food sources, which have negative effects on wildlife.

Roger Tabor, one of the world's leading experts on cats and one of the few biologists who has studied feral cats for over 30 years, had this to say to Estelle Munro in her 2003 article, "Living in the Gray Zone:" "The clear leading animal that's really putting wildlife at risk is the human population. We just don't like to acknowledge that it is our fault. It's not a case of the cat being the worst offender. It isn't even remotely the worst offender. It's us."

Conservationists state they are not saying cats are the number one cause of bird deaths, but they also say that it is too late to find solutions to stop, or at least slow down, land development, and it is easier to kill cats, so let us take that approach. The former director of the American Bird Conservancy's "Cats Indoors!" campaign, Linda Winter puts it simply, "We may not know the exact numbers of birds that cats kill, but we know cats kill them, and it's an unnecessary and easily avoidable loss" (Ridgley, 2003).

Humans have the largest effect on the environment and all living things on the planet Earth. Unfortunately, not until politics, money, and personal agendas

are set aside will the devastation on the planet halt. Blaming cats for songbird decline is a facile and simplistic “solution” to a complex problem. Alley Cat Rescue invites conservation groups to work *with* us and the many other cat rescue groups across the country to implement humane, nonlethal management programs for feral cats. That is how we will get a handle on reducing the number of outdoor cats, so that cats, birds, and other wildlife will all benefit.

We ALL want the same thing: fewer feral and outdoor community cats. We,

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) advocates, have a solution, where the conservation groups do not. We want fewer cats, using humane, nonlethal methods. They would like to ban our work. This will only cause more colonies to form, and more kittens to be born, to suffer, and in many cases to die. Again, time spent blaming cats for our environmental ills is time wasted. If we really want to save birds and other wildlife, then we need to work together and focus our energy on tackling the big-picture issues, like habitat loss, climate change, and pollution, that are the *true* culprits of wildlife devastation.

Double Standards: Humans are Pests

“If there is a world’s worst pest, an exotic invader that surpasses all others, surely it is the human species,” biologist and author Tim Low notes in his 1999 book, “Feral Future: The Untold Story of Australia’s Exotic Invaders.” “No other animal has swarmed across the globe in such numbers or displaced so many other life forms in the process. Our ability to invade new habitats is unsurpassed.” (Low, 1999)