



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

A PUBLICATION OF THE WV PARTNERS IN FLIGHT WORKING GROUP

SPRING, 2003

Perils for Birds: Past and Present



Of the challenges faced by bird populations, the majority are related to human activities. Some of the most significant threats of the past century have been overcome due to increased advocacy for wildlife and the passage of numerous laws protecting birds and their habitats. However, major threats persist, putting numerous species at risk and requiring our attention and action.

Habitat Loss and Degradation **Past**

By 1900, millions of immigrants had arrived in North America, clearing forests, draining wetlands, and converting native grasslands for farming, grazing and fuel. With widespread conversion of natural habitat to human uses, it's no wonder that many forms of once-abundant wildlife, such as the wild turkey, became scarce in settled areas.

People now generally recognize the importance of conserving habitat

Birds are still victims of pesticide exposure. Each year, about 67 million birds die from direct exposure to pesticides on farmlands in the U.S.

in order to conserve wildlife. Natural habitat is protected in the form of Migratory Bird Sanctuaries and National Wildlife Areas in Canada; National Wildlife Refuges in the U.S., and the System of Protected Natural Areas in Mexico. In North America, 2.5 million km² (618 million acres) of land, freshwater, and marine areas – equaling nine percent of the continent – have been dedicated as wildlife habitat. Public lands held for other purposes, such as forestry, grazing, and even military exercises are also set aside for wildlife, as are millions of acres by private landowners.

Present

The fact is that despite the areas set aside for wildlife, some bird populations are still at risk from habitat loss. Much of the landscape continues to undergo degradation and conversion due to human development and disturbance. We are still experiencing a net loss of wetlands in North America, for example. Growing numbers of birds are also killed due to collisions with human structures and equipment, including power lines, communication towers, wind turbines, glass windows and automobiles. Our challenge is to manage landscapes, control development and alter our activities in such a way that people and birds can coexist.

Overexploitation **Past**

Wild birds were once sold for food in restaurants and markets across North America. All types of birds were harvested, including shorebirds, seabirds, even songbirds, in addition to those considered “game birds” today (such as ducks, geese, doves, turkeys, pheasants). Wild birds were also harvested for their skins and feathers to supply the millinery (hat making) trade. In 1866, American Museum of Natural History ornithologist Frank Chapman surveyed ladies’ hats during two walks in New York City and discovered the bodies or body parts of wild birds on 542 out of 700 hats.

The commercial trade in birds depleted some species to the point of extinction. Fortunately, public campaigns, stronger regulations, and changing fashion stopped the slaughter. These days, most birds are under some form of protection. It’s illegal to possess most wild bird feathers

(Continued to next page)

SPRING PIF MEETING

When: Friday, April 4th

Where: Waffle Hut, Flatwoods

Agenda: 9:30 am-Social (*refreshments provided*)

10 am Welcome, announcements, reports

11 am-Guest Speaker

11:45-12:45 pm-

Lunch on your own

12:45-4 Working Group sessions

For more information contact: Rob

Tallman, (304) 637-0245 or

rtallman@dnr.state.wv.us.



without a permit. For species still harvested, well-regulated hunting serves as a tool for conservation rather than a threat.

Present

Some species of birds are still threatened by commercial exploitation; most notably, parrots targeted for the exotic pet bird trade. Trade in wild-caught parrots, coupled with habitat loss, has resulted in the parrot family having more globally threatened species than any other family of birds. The U. S. used to be the largest consumer of parrots, legally importing 250,000 mostly wild-caught parrots a year. This changed with the passage of the U.S. Wild Bird Conservation Act, which controls trade in parrots listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, and with Mexico's ban on exporting parrots. The Act also helped reduce smuggling, but illegally-caught parrots still flow across the border. The black market and the legal trade still occurring in many countries are cause for great concern. Consumers should take care to never buy a wild caught parrot; for every one that reaches a store, four will have died along the way.

Pesticides

Past

From the 1940's to 1960's, the pesticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) was used in numerous countries to vanquish malaria and other insect-borne diseases, saving human lives, and to control agricultural pests, boosting food production. Unfortunately, DDT and many other pesticides were frequently over-applied and inappropriately used. DDT and other hydrocarbon pesticides in the bird's food accumulated in their bodies affecting eggshell production and causing nesting failure. The result was a drastic decline in Brown Pelicans as well as Ospreys, Bald Eagles and other birds of prey. Due to public outcry, authorities in the U.S. and Canada



banned DDT in the early 1970s and enacted stronger regulations of pesticide productions and use.

Present

Birds are still victims of pesticide exposure. Each year, about 67 million birds die from direct exposure to pesticides on farmlands in the U.S. An estimated 7 million bird deaths are attributed to homeowner use of pesticides. These figures do not include birds that perish after a period of illness, that die after feeding on poisoned insects, rodents, or other prey, or losses due to failed reproduction (eggs left unhatched or nestlings left to starve). The impact on birds from pesticide use in areas outside the U.S. is unknown. Exposure is likely to be higher in Latin American countries where migratory birds spend their winters and pesticide types and application are less regulated.

Homeowners have many opportunities to lessen the impacts of pesticides on birds and minimize bird deaths. Currently, homeowners use up to 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre on their lawns than farmers. Moreover, a 1992 survey revealed that more than 63 percent of the households surveyed had 1 to 5 pesticides in storage.

Homeowners can improve this situation by practicing pest prevention, planting native vegetation, encouraging birds to visit, using non-chemical controls where possible, and carefully following application and disposal instructions.

Introduced Species

Past

Purposefully or accidentally, people have introduced new plants and animals around the world, some of which have proven very harmful to native birds. A famous intentional introduction was the 1890-91 release of 80 to 100 European starlings in New York City by an organization seeking to introduce to North America all birds mentioned by Shakespeare. Starlings proliferated and now compete with native

birds for nesting sites. Unintentional introductions occur when new species are transferred unknowingly or accidentally. For instance, black rats and Norway rats from Europe were stowaways on early ships arriving in the Americas. Rats prey on many native bird species, as well as being a serious pest to humans.



Introduced species may adversely affect native bird populations in ways other than predation or competition. Introduced herbivores and exotic plants can degrade habitat quality; other introduced species serve as carriers of disease. The effects of introduced species are most severe on islands, where seabirds dependent on islands or resident species evolved to be flightless, are especially vulnerable to introduced species such as rats, snakes, hogs, foxes, and goats. Ninety percent of historical bird extinctions have occurred on islands.

Present

Today, numerous regulations and campaigns exist to remove harmful introduced species and prevent new introductions. For example, authorities in Hawaii vigilantly search port facilities to avoid introduction of the brown tree snake, responsible for the decimation of birds on Guam. However, some introduced species are here to stay. In fact, one of the most dangerous introduced predators is the domestic cat. Tame and feral cats kill hundreds of millions of songbirds and other avian species each year. A study in Wisconsin estimated that in that state alone, rural housecats kill roughly 39 million birds annually. Add the deaths caused by feral cats, or domestic cats in urban and suburban areas, and this mortality figure would be much higher. Responsible cat owners, by spaying and neutering and keeping cats indoors, prevent unwanted, uncared-for cats; have healthier pets; and save the lives of millions of birds each year.

The previous article was reprinted from a US Fish and Wildlife Service fact sheet. Check their website:

www.birds.fws.gov.

Species of Note: Eastern Wood Pewee

Scientific Name: Eastern pewee, pewit, pewee flycatcher.

Size: This bird weighs an average of one-half ounce and is about 6-7 inches long.

Appearance: The eastern wood pewee's upperparts are a dusky, grayish-olive with pale yellow-white underparts and an olive wash over the sides of the breast and on the flanks. A pale line runs down the center of its breast and it has two white bars on the wing and a yellow lower jaw. The eastern wood pewee has no eye ring, and when perched, it sits motionless, without bobbing its tail.

Range: The pewee winters in Central and South America and migrates north to the eastern United States and Canada from April to May.

Habitat: You can find the eastern wood pewee in deciduous or mixed deciduous-coniferous woodlands or shady parks as well as home gardens.

Mating: Males pursue females vigorously in a courtship chase and once mated, the pair is monogamous. Pairs split up after the young are raised and remain solitary until the following spring mating season.

Nesting: Nests are built on the horizontal limbs of oak, maple, elm

or other hardwood tree, about 15-50 feet up in the air. The nest is cup-shaped, about 3 inches in diameter and so covered with lichens and moss that it is almost impossible to spot it from the ground. The structure of the nest consists of weed stems, plant fibers, spider cocoons, string, etc. The nest is lined with soft substances such as wool, grasses, bits of thread or horsehair.

Eggs: An average of 3 eggs are laid from May through early July. The eggs are incubated for 13 days and the young are ready to leave the nest 15-18 days after hatching. Both the male and female share the responsibility of incubating the eggs. The eastern wood pewee raises only one brood each nesting season.

Diet: The eastern wood pewee's diet includes flies, beetles, wasps, ants, tussock and gypsy moths, canker worms, treehoppers, bugs, grasshoppers, as well as elderberries, blackberries, pokeberries.

Hunting Technique: This bird hovers and gleans throughout the wood, darting off a hidden perch to catch an unwary insect flying by, then quickly reversing to fly back to its perch high in the tree canopy.

Status: The eastern wood pewee has been found in every county in

West Virginia, with probable breeding activity in all but the highest elevations.

Naturalist Notes: The eastern wood pewee is a fairly regular but not overly common host to brown-headed cowbirds.



Events Not To Miss!

International Migratory Bird Day

Saturday, May 10th: Check local papers for events near you or log onto www.birdday.org

Annual Peregrine Cliff Watch

Saturday March 29th: Contact: Jack Wallace at jwallace@dnr.state.wv.us or Rob Tallman at rtallman@dnr.state.wv.us

Peregrine Falcon Watch

Mid February – April: Contact Sammy Pugh at sammy_pugh@nps.gov

THREE RIVERS AVIAN CENTER'S

Migration Celebration 2003

FREE admission and exciting events for the whole family including story telling, pony rides, magic, crafts, birding walks led by expert birders, local artists' booths, ski lift rides, food concessions, birds of prey, and live music all day long!

For more information and directions, call 304.466.4683 or toll free in WV 800.721.5252.

May 10th from
10am to 6pm at
Winterplace Ski Resort
near Ghent in Raleigh County WV



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National Partners in Flight News

America's 500 Most Important Bird Areas Mapped

For the first time ever, America's most important places for birds have been named and mapped. The top 500 Globally Important Bird Areas (IBAs) have been identified by scientists at the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), in consultation with hundreds of biologists and wildlife managers across the country. ABC has produced a detailed map of the IBAs in conjunction with the National Geographic Society, and the project will also result in a major publication with full details on bird populations and conservation issues at each IBA. Together, the book and map will serve as the definitive source for the most valuable places for bird conservation in the U.S.

To find out which sites near you have been named Globally Important Bird Areas and see a sample image of the IBA map, visit www.abcbirds.org/

iba/aboutiba.htm, or contact Gavin Shire: (202) 452-1535, gshire@abcbirds.org.

Environmental Groups File Petition Against Communication Towers

Three conservation organizations recently filed a formal petition with the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") demanding that the FCC immediately cease issuance of licenses for new communication towers along the Gulf Coast. The petitioners, including the American Bird Conservancy (Washington, D.C.), Forest Conservation Council (Santa Fe, NM), and Friends of the Earth (Washington D.C.), say no more towers should be constructed until the completion of an environmental impact statement which addresses the adverse effects of communications towers in the Gulf Coast region on migratory birds.

The Gulf Coast, defined here as a 100-mile wide belt along the southern Gulf Coast from Port Isabel, Texas to Tampa Bay, Florida, is a recognized critical stopover region for neotropical migratory birds. Drawn to the lights atop the towers, particularly at night and during low cloud cover, the birds circle in confusion, dying by the thousands in collisions with the tower, its guy wires and related structures, each other, or even the ground. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that as many as 40 million birds are killed each year in these collisions nationwide.

The petition cites violations of the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, and Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The groups are seeking an order from FCC mandating preparation of environmental reviews on 5,797 towers that were illegally authorized using a loophole in environmental regulations.



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