

Did We Actually Lose 3 Billion Birds? Part II

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Most people that I know care about wildlife and birds especially. They feed birds in the wintertime. They feed hummingbirds in the summer. They watch birds when they are in their yards relaxing. They like birds. The natural response to this loss of 3 billion birds immediately becomes, "What can I do about it?" That is a question that is loaded with a lot of uncomfortable discussions.

Let's first indicate that all ecosystems are losing ground. The losses range from a 17% loss in eastern forest birds to a 53% loss in grassland birds which includes our state bird, the Western Meadowlark. Issues like pesticides and habitat loss or habitat fragmentation become challenging to quantify the losses from. Pesticides can reduce food sources far more than actually poisoning the birds. You get a ripple effect. Communications towers, whether they are radio station towers or cell phone towers, all kill birds regardless of the habitat that they are in.

Many of our songbirds are neotropic migrants. They nest in the USA or Canada but winter in Mexico, Central America or South America. Anything that impacts resting or wintering areas in other countries can have an impact. You've seen the reports of fires in the Amazon? That's impacting wintering areas for many species. It truly is an interconnected web of life.

Many studies have been done over the past 10 years to try to determine the biggest causes of loss. Many studies have been done by different researchers in different parts of the country and one cause of mortality keeps coming out at the top of the list: cats. Let me state right now that I like cats. They are amazing creatures. We had one as a pet for many years. It was an indoors cat. Which is the only place cats should be. Cats are not native to the North American ecosystem. They are incredibly efficient killers, even cats that are well fed. It is their nature to hunt and kill. The generally accepted estimates of number of birds killed annually by cats in North America is 2.6 BILLION. Some of the estimates go as high as 3.4 billion annually. Every study performed by independent researchers over the past decade continues to show these high numbers and that's on top of other creatures that cats kill. The one biggest thing that could be done to help bird population is to keep cats indoors and reduce feral cat populations. It's not popular with people, it's a political hot potato, but the numbers speak for themselves.

Coming in at a distant second is collisions with windows. Annual loss estimate is 624 million, one fourth the loss of cats. We've all seen or heard birds strike our windows. Some survive (if a cat doesn't get them), but many do not. This is a big challenge, not just to us in our homes but to commercial buildings even in big towns. Many songbirds migrate at night. The lights of big city's lure these birds down into the buildings and reflections make them think they are flying into open space. There is a lot of research being done on finding window surface treatments that the birds see but aren't distracting to us. Whatever you may use, it needs to be on the outside of the window. Contact me for options to reduce bird strikes on windows.

The last one I'm going to talk about is collisions with vehicles. Estimates are a little over 200 million bird mortalities annually. If you've spent any time on the road, you've hit a bird that flew across the road. Sadly, other than slow down, there's not a lot we can do. If we could reduce by half, the mortalities caused by these three sources, we'd make a big dent in reversing this scary trend. As I said earlier, we are all in this ecosystem called Earth together. What happens to one creature ultimately can affect us all. If we all try to take some little steps to reduce our impact, it'll benefit not just birds but all creatures, including ourselves.