



Conserving Colonial Birds - At Home and Away

International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD), held annually on the second Saturday in May, is an invitation to celebrate and support migratory bird conservation.

The sound of a colony of singing Tricolored Blackbirds - likened to cats fighting - and the endless activity on a cliff of nesting seabirds belies the vulnerability of colonial birds to myriad natural and human-related threats. The latter include introduced predators and competitors; disturbance to nesting, feeding or resting areas; loss and degradation of habitat; and fishery conflicts. Fortunately, people can easily reduce these threats by their actions and choices.

Fight the Invasion

Alien species are those that have been accidentally or intentionally introduced into habitats where they are not native. They are termed "invasive" if they cause ecological harm, such as resulting in habitat alteration and degradation, out-competing or directly harming native species. Birds gathered in colonies can be especially vulnerable to invasive species. Introduced species that prey on birds, such as rats, cats, and foxes, or that compete with birds for nesting sites and food, such as House Sparrows and Starlings, can depress or even eliminate populations. Herbivores, such as goats, and exotic plants can degrade habitat quality or even eliminate use of sites by colonial birds. Even insects, such as fire ants, can kill nesting birds. Others serve as disease vectors.

Help reduce the impacts of invasive species:

- Never release unwanted animals to the wild, and keep pets under control.
- Drain water and remove any aquatic weeds or other hitchhikers on your boat, diving gear, jet skis, trailers, floatplanes or other equipment before leaving an area.

- Use native plants in landscaping.
- Teach yourself and your children about the richness of living systems and how the reduction or removal of invasive species is necessary to preserve biological diversity and natural systems.
- Participate in community groups designed to restore habitat or to survey, remove and report sightings of invasive species.

Learn more at

<http://www.invasivespecies.gov/>

Do Not Disturb

It is possible for many birds to become accustomed to human activities, and some colonies thrive in areas of high human populations. However, all birds require "comfort zones" for nesting, feeding or resting, and intrusion into this space can threaten the birds' health and survival. Disturbance at colonies can have serious results. For example, when wading birds are frightened from their large open nests, eggs and chicks may be scattered and left exposed to the elements and predators. If disturbed frequently, adults may abandon breeding altogether, and the whole colony may fail. Disturbance can have similar effects on beach-nesting colonial birds. On the open sand, exposed eggs and chicks are subject to intense heat by day and cold at night. Furthermore, their coloration makes them practically invisible on the ground, and people may walk or drive over them unintentionally.

You can help reduce the harmful effects of disturbance:

- Keep your distance from wildlife on land and on water. Your presence may keep birds from feeding, resting or returning to their nests.

IMBD Information

web - <http://birds.fws.gov/imbd>
phone - 703/358-2318

IMBD Materials

web - <http://www.BirdDay.org>
phone - 1-866/334-3330

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- Do not intentionally force birds to fly, e.g., while walking the shoreline.
- Please steer your boats, kayaks, jet skis, away from shore; this will minimize habitat damage as well.
- Keep pets leashed.

- Honor the signs posted to restrict entry into nesting areas.

- Spread the word, sharing your knowledge about the harmful effects of disturbance.

Learn more at <http://myfwc.com/viewing/info/disturbance.htm> and <http://www.ammpa.org/>

Protect Habitat

Most colonial birds live near water, and these birds' dependence on aquatic habitats such as river and stream corridors, wooded swamps, barrier islands, and coastal estuaries makes them especially vulnerable to the numerous threats facing water and wetland resources globally. As rivers are altered and wetlands drained and filled, colonial birds lose places to feed and nest. The loss and degradation of coastal wetlands, subject to the greatest rates of human population growth, development and associated disturbance, are especially damaging, since colonial birds are concentrated on coasts.

You can help protect wetland habitats:

- Get involved. Find out where wetlands exist near your home, try to learn more about them, and support educational and restoration efforts.

- Support wetlands and watershed protection initiatives by public agencies and private organizations.

- Purchase federal duck stamps from your local post office to support wetland acquisition.

- Participate in the Clean Water Act Section 404 program and state regulatory programs by reviewing public notices and, in appropriate cases, commenting on permit applications.

- Encourage neighbors, developers, and state and local governments to protect the function and value of wetlands in your watershed.

If your property contains wetlands:

- Explore alternatives to draining or filling as means of bringing lands into production: waterfowl habitat; hay, forage or wild rice crops; hunting and trapping leases; and selective timber harvest.

- Select upland rather than wetlands sites for development projects and avoid wetland alteration or degradation during project construction.

- Maintain wetlands and adjacent buffer strips as open space; there are easement programs that subsidize these choices.

Learn more at <http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/vital/protection.html>

Clean Up Our Act

Colonial birds' dependence on aquatic habitats makes them susceptible to habitat degradation as well as loss. Pesticides, fertilizers, metals, and industrial chemicals have added large nutrient and toxic burdens to freshwater and coastal wetlands and open oceans. These contaminants can poison birds directly or damage the food chains upon which they rely. Oil is a major environmental threat: birds affected annually by spills can number in the hundreds of thousands in some areas. Solid waste is also a problem. Colonial birds, particularly seabirds, ingest plastics and other artificial debris as a natural consequence of foraging. They are also caught in discarded fishing line, nets and other wastes.

You can help reduce the effects of pollution on colonial birds:

- Be a careful user of pesticides, following application and disposal instructions carefully, reducing use, and finding non-toxic or low-impact substitutes.

- Produce less waste: Reduce, reuse and recycle. Look for alternative materials or avoid excessive packaging when deciding on purchases.

- Participate in beach, river and stream cleanups and monitoring programs.

- If you fish, carefully dispose of lines, nets, and hooks. Take the time to recover miscast or snagged lines. Do not encourage birds to loiter near fishing spots by feeding them bait or fish wastes.

- Practice good housekeeping. Dispose of trash and fluids (e.g., motor oil) properly. This will help reduce the amount of pollution that is washed into our waterways from storm drains.

- Do not release balloons into the environment and cut the rings of plastic six-pack holders.

- Educate others about the harmful effects of pollution on wildlife.

Learn more at

www.oceanconservancy.com and <http://www.epa.gov/owow/oceans/debris/>

Careful Consumer Choices

Great numbers of ocean-feeding colonial birds (seabirds) are incidentally caught and killed by longlines, gillnets, and other gear used in fisheries around the world (an occurrence called incidental catch or bycatch). Fisheries can also have indirect negative effects on seabird populations, by reducing the availability of prey or altering the sea bottom habitat.

By being selective about the fish we buy, we can influence fishery practices, reducing the deaths of seabirds and many other marine animals. Based on information about fish populations, fishing techniques, aquaculture impacts, and bycatch, Monterey Bay Aquarium produces a consumer's guide to seafood, categorizing seafood into "Best Choices," "Caution" and "Avoid."

Learn more about responsible seafood choices at <http://www.mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp>.

One of the more memorable ways to contribute to colonial bird conservation is to volunteer in monitoring, research and stewardship programs involving these birds. The American Birding Association compiles a directory of volunteer opportunities for birds. Programs range from monitoring local Purple Martins to three-month studies of seabirds on remote Central Pacific Islands. Learn more at <http://www.americanbirding.org/opps/index.html>.