



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

IMBD Information

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

IMBD Sales

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

January 2003

Perils Past and Present

Major Threats to Birds Over Time

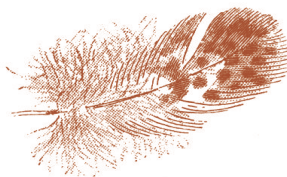
Of the challenges faced by bird populations, the majority are related to human activities. Some of the most significant threats of the past century have been overcome due to increased advocacy for wildlife and the passage of numerous laws protecting birds and their habitats. However, major threats persist, 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 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 and State wildlife management areas 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 – equalling 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 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. In addition, growing numbers of birds are 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

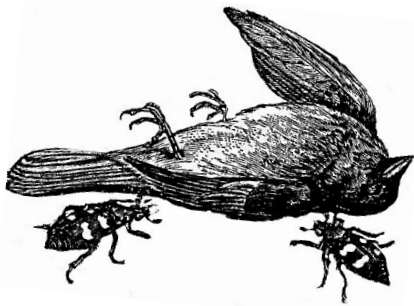
Past

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 1886, 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 even illegal to possess most wild bird feathers 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 1940s to 1960s, 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 accumulated in the bodies of birds of prey via the food chain, affecting eggshell production and causing nesting failure. The result was a drastic decline in Brown Pelicans, 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 regulation of pesticide production 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 the permissible types and quantities of pesticides 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 and spend more per acre, on average, to maintain their lawns than farmers spend per acre on crops. 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, since island-bound birds such as nesting seabirds 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.*

