

Opinions

We're losing birds at an alarming rate. We can do something about it.

By Michael Parr

Michael Parr is the president of the American Bird Conservancy.

You probably see birds frequently — so much so that they might seem to be everywhere. The reality, of course, is that our subjective experience goes only so far. On Thursday, researchers released a new large-scale study that shows that bird populations in North America are undergoing massive and unsustainable declines — even species that experts previously thought were adapting to human-modified landscapes.

Three billion is an unimaginably large number. But that's the number of birds that have been lost from North America since 1970. It is more than a quarter of the total bird population of the continent. Though some species have increased, those that are doing better are massively outweighed by the losers. Among the worst-hit bird groups are insect-eating birds such as swifts and swallows, grassland birds such as meadowlarks and Savannah sparrows, and the longest-distance migrants such as cerulean warblers and wood thrushes.

Birds are a critical part of the natural food chain, and this loss of birds represents a loss of ecological integrity that, along with climate change, suggests that nature as we know it is beginning to die.

This is a genuine crisis, yet there is still time to turn it around. We know what the problems are, and we know the actions needed to affect change. Alongside strong migratory bird, clean-water and endangered species legislation, and critically important work to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts, maintaining habitat is paramount.

In fact, the single greatest cause of these bird declines has been the loss and degradation of high-quality habitat. Habitat loss can seem like “death by a thousand cuts,” but some cuts go deeper than others, and some are more easily healed. The condition of U.S. public lands is based on a collective decision — and we as a nation must decide between an emphasis on exploitative and extractive uses or nature-based and recreational uses. By better managing public lands, we can do a lot to help birds, particularly grassland and sagebrush species such as the western meadowlark and greater sage-grouse, and birds found in fire-dependent forests in the West such as black-backed and white-headed woodpeckers. Policies benefiting these and other birds will help restore nature as a whole.

Private lands can benefit from public support, too: Funding for farm-bill conservation programs makes an enormous difference to how private land management is supported — through the popular Working Lands for Wildlife initiative, for example. While birds such as the northern bobwhite and golden-winged warbler can act as “canaries in the coal mine” for the health of

such habitats, **programs that benefit them also help native plants**, insects and other wildlife. State Wildlife Grants can also make a huge contribution to the bird and nature crises if fully financed through the Recovering America's Wildlife Act , for example.

Let's not forget, however, that many of our declining birds are migratory and rely on habitat south of our borders. The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act has funded hundreds of projects to improve wintering habitat for migratory birds, but it needs a significant funding increase. Many of these projects help people, too, by supporting sustainable agriculture, controlling erosion, and creating jobs in nature-based tourism and conservation.

When Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring " was published in 1962, the primary concern was that pesticides — especially DDT — were poisoning birds. In the intervening years, we banned or phased out DDT and the most bird-toxic carbamates and organophosphates, only to see them replaced by a more pernicious generation of pesticides, the neonicotinoids.

"Neonics" are used to "inoculate" plants against insects and are used even when no pests are present. They remove both harmful and beneficial insects. If you use a billion pounds of insect poison annually — as we do on the American landscape — you are going to wind up with fewer and fewer insects. Then fewer birds. Then fewer bird predators and, eventually, far fewer animals overall. It's time to ban neonics until we can be sure that these poisons are not permanently damaging American nature.

Fortunately, each of us can do our part to make a difference for birds and other wildlife. Keeping cats indoors, adding decals or other bird deterrents to glass windows and eliminating harmful pesticides from our yards are all things that will help bird populations recover — if enough of us participate. **Planting native plants also encourages beneficial insects and other wildlife to return, and rewards us with yards brimming with life.** The corporate sector has a critical role to play, as well, by expanding sustainable forestry and placing wind turbines away from sensitive bird areas, for example.

While environmental news such as this new research on bird declines often tends to sound negative, it is simply data that we can choose to act on — or not. It's a bit like hearing you have elevated cholesterol: You can choose to ignore it, but if you do, worse consequences likely await. We now have a choice to make. Let's seize this moment to take care of the health of our planet, birds and all.