



Providing Safe Haven for Migratory Birds

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The bird hit the window with all the speed of a Mack truck slamming into a brick wall. A ghostly impression and few tufts of feathers were left on the glass. The rose-breasted grosbeak lay dead on the ground.

Throughout the year, we enjoy watching birds from the full-pane glass doors on the second story of our office. But in spring, as males and females chase each other through the woods beyond as part of their mating ritual, the reflective glass occasionally becomes a death trap. The birds are simply flying too fast to see the difference between reflection and reality.

The majority of migratory birds don't live to see their first birthday. But many of the hazards they face can be minimized.

What a paradox: our office is part of a 140-acre wildlife sanctuary. Our goal is to attract birds, not harm them.

Common Bird Hazards

Few people today intentionally harm birds. But migratory birds are in fact maimed and killed by the millions each year as a result of our carelessness, inaction, and ignorance. Bird hazards include collisions with cars, buildings, windows and high-tension wires, pesticide poisoning both in this country and on wintering grounds in Mexico and Central and South America, cat predation, habitat loss, and destruction of breeding sites.

The rose-breasted grosbeak was our wake-up call. It was our *call to action*, one bird too late. We assessed our office windows and mounted bird silhouettes to break up glare and reflections. We also open doors and windows, whenever possible, since the screens aren't reflective. These simple measures didn't cost us a dime, but they help us prevent costing the life of our birds.

Your property, too, may have its own wake-up call. But there is no need to wait until there is a dead bird on the ground to take action. Take the time now to assess the bird hazards on your property and do what you can to ensure that you're providing safe haven for migratory birds.

Follow these easy steps to reduce bird hazards :

- 1. Get a birds-eye perspective.** Look around your property and try to identify threats to birds. A good way to do this is to pretend you are a bird seeking refuge on your site. What dangers might you face?
- 2. Review Potential Solutions.** If you identify a bird hazard, review potential solutions. For instance, if you currently mow tall grass fields prior to August 1st, can you change your mowing schedule to allow for safe ground nesting? If you need to mow for hay, can you determine where bird nests are and mow around them?
- 3. Take Action.** Implement your solution and evaluate its effectiveness.

Providing safe haven

Putting up bird feeders and nest boxes and enhancing wildlife habitat are great ways to encourage birds to use your property. But to ensure that the birds you attract thrive, it's essential to create a safe haven by eliminating bird hazards.

All birds face natural risks that you can't control. Predation, bad weather, and disease are three common threats that are part of the natural cycle of life and death for all wildlife. But hazards caused by people *can* be dealt with. Read more about some of the most pervasive hazards facing birds and then take action to make your property both safe and inviting.

Common Bird Hazards

Habitat Removal

The problem:

When we think about habitat destruction, we usually think about large scale habitat losses such as rainforest destruction, wetland loss, or the development of industry or housing subdivisions on former farmland or other open space. Indeed, these are major environmental concerns. Yet everyday, smaller habitats are fragmented or lost much closer to home. Grassland, forest, wetland, desert, and in fact, all native habitats are important for migratory birds. If you clean up your woods by removing dead trees, understory shrubs, or leaf litter, you're removing vital habitat. If you expand lawn by mowing tall fields, you're removing habitat. If you remove vegetation from pond or lake shorelines, you're losing habitat.

What you can do:

- Conserve and enhance existing habitats whenever possible. If you need to clear vegetation, do it in late summer or fall, after birds have nested.
- If you're constructing new buildings or facilities try to leave as much natural vegetation as possible. Cluster buildings to leave as much open space undisturbed as possible.
- Consider placing a conservation easement on all or part of your property to permanently protect significant habitats.

Outdoor Cats

The problem:

Cats are by very nature hunters. If you have an outdoor cat, you can probably think of numerous times when your precious kitty has left dead or dying birds or rodents on your doorstep. But how much of a threat do outdoor cats pose? Scientific studies show that America's 30 million outdoor cats kill *hundreds of millions* of migratory songbirds each year.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin estimate that more than 35 million songbirds are killed each year by rural cats in Wisconsin alone. Cats were introduced to North America in the 1800's to control rats and should not be considered part of the natural food chain. They pose a serious threat especially to young birds and nestlings.

What you can do:

- Keep cats indoors. Research shows that de-clawing cats and bell collars *do not* prevent cats from preying on birds.
- If you insist on letting your cat roam freely, seriously consider restricting time outside each day or limiting outdoor access to fall and winter months only.
- Work with your humane society or state wildlife agency if stray cats are a problem.

Pesticide Use

The problem:



Scouting for pest problems and treating them only when they reach damaging levels can help to reduce chemical use.

Though we've come a long way in reducing pesticide risks to people and wildlife since the days of DDT use, pesticide poisoning remains a very real danger to birds. This is especially true on wintering grounds in Mexico and Central and South America where pesticides that are banned in this country are still widely used on agricultural fields. Closer to home, backyard lawn care still includes products such as Diazinon, a known bird hazard. Many common pesticides can cause acute or chronic toxicity to wildlife. And since wildlife movement cannot be controlled, eliminating exposure is difficult.

What you can do:

- At the very least, adopt a comprehensive integrated pest management (IPM) program. By maintaining sound cultural practices, monitoring pest activity, and employing a variety of control measures, you should be able to reduce your need for pesticides.
- Keep in mind that insects are a vital part of the food chain-- your goal should be to maintain balance, not wipe out all bugs.
- Cultivate organic vegetable and flower gardens rather than relying on synthetic pesticides.
- If you hire a lawn care company, inquire about their IPM practices and seek out professionals who do not rely on a regular calendar spray program for all customers.
- Avoid using products that have a history of being lethal to birds. Read the label carefully and always follow instructions for products you choose to use.
- If you would like to learn more about IPM for your property, please call us! We have many good resources and references to share.

Disruption of Breeding Sites

The problem:



Leave dead trees standing, when they don't pose a safety hazard. They serve as nesting sites for many cavity-nesting birds.

Many people unknowingly disrupt breeding sites each year when they clear vegetation, such as trees, shrubs, hedge rows or fields, during the spring and summer when birds are nesting. When birds cannot nest successfully, population numbers decrease. Small losses on individual properties may only affect the bird population on that site, while the large scale loss of breeding sites can endanger an entire species' population.

What you can do:

- Think about where birds on your property are likely to nest. Generally, these will be out-of-the-way places, hidden by vegetation.
- Avoid disturbing natural areas during the spring and summer months when birds are nesting. For instance, don't clear woodland understory or cut back hedge rows during May, June, and July. Leave fields unmown until after July 30th when ground-nesting birds have finished nesting.
- Never disturb nests, eggs, or young birds unless you have a special permit to deal with a wildlife problem.
- If you find nestlings or young birds that have recently left the nest, don't assume that they are abandoned by their mother unless you see evidence of her demise. Many well-intentioned people intervene unnecessarily in such situations, taking healthy young birds away from their parents. Only a licensed wildlife rehabilitator is authorized to care for young or injured birds.

Window Collisions

The problem:

When birds collide with reflective glass windows on office towers and other buildings, it often results in fatal injury or immediate death. Researchers at Muhlenberg College estimate that 98-to-976 million birds fly into windows during migration each year. (Birds occasionally hit windows intentionally during spring when establishing a breeding territory. Seeing the reflection of themselves, they think that another male has moved in on their turf and they repeatedly fly at the reflection to drive off the perceived intruder. This type of window collision generally does not result in injury or death and ends within a few days or weeks.)

What you can do:

- Go outside and evaluate your windows. If you were flying fast, would you see an obstacle or the reflection of sky or trees?
- Break up the reflection on the *outside* of the glass with a non-reflective window coating, window screens, flash tape or bird netting.
- Plant trees or install window awnings to reduce or eliminate reflections.
- Mount bird silhouettes in combination with other measures. Their usefulness is limited.
- Place bird feeders either very close to buildings (within 3 feet) or place them at a distance of 30 feet. More collisions occur where birds congregate.

Overcrowded Conditions at Ponds or Feeders

The problem:



Putting up a bird feeder is a perfect way to enjoy birds. But be sure to clean up waste and clean your feeder regularly to prevent the spread of disease.

Diseases are easily spread at overcrowded feeders or ponds. Sick birds are generally less alert and less active. They feed less, may be reluctant to fly, and their feathers look un-kempt.

What you can do:

- Avoid crowding at feeders by providing ample space. If your feeder birds have to jostle each other to reach the food, add another feeder or two to reduce crowding.
- Clean up wastes and wash your feeder on a regular basis. Once or twice a month, disinfect feeders with a 10 percent solution of household bleach in water (1 part bleach in 9 parts of water).
- Store food securely to avoid contamination by rodents. Discard food that gets wet or moldy.
- If you think that ponds or lakes are overcrowded with waterfowl, if you notice diseased or dead waterfowl, or if you suspect that water quality in ponds or lakes is degraded from overcrowded conditions, contact your state wildlife agency. They can help you assess the problem and work with you to find solutions.

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