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Crisis for birds is our crisis: Things you can do to help in the SC Lowcountry

BY JANE HESTER AND JOHN BLOOMFIELD *SPECIAL TO THE ISLAND PACKET AND THE BEAUFORT GAZETTE*

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 24, 2019 3:25 PM



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Here's how you can help the threatened piping plover. We've also included a few other facts about the small shorebird that overwinters here in the Lowcountry. BY JAY KARR



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A major study published last week in the journal Science confirmed what many birders have long suspected: since 1970, less than the time many of us have been alive, North America has lost more than a quarter of its birds — some 3 billion in all.

The study, in the nation's leading scientific journal, was a collaborative effort among seven major institutions, including the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the American Bird Conservancy.

The losses documented by the study include dramatic declines by Eastern and Western Meadowlarks (down by 139 million) and feeder favorites such as Dark-eyed Juncos (down by 168 million) and White-throated Sparrows (down by 93 million). Baltimore Orioles, a wintertime resident in the Lowcountry, have seen their numbers cut nearly in half.

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In today's world, it is convenient to cast doubt on information we find inconvenient — but make no mistake, this is extremely credible science. As Cornell Lab Director Dr. John Fitzpatrick and his colleague Dr. Peter Marra, director of the George Town Environmental Initiative, wrote in an op-ed published in The New York Times:

“Birds are the best-studied group of wildlife; their populations have been carefully monitored over decades by scientists and citizen scientists alike.”

The study drew from multiple standardized bird-monitoring datasets such as breeding bird surveys, some of which provide close to 50 years of population data. It also used 10 years of data from a network of 143 NEXRAD weather radars across the U.S. to track nocturnal bird migration trends.

The results signal an “unfolding crisis,” Fitzpatrick and Marra write. “More than half our grassland birds have disappeared, 717 million in all. Forests have lost more than 1 billion birds.”

What is shocking is that much of the loss is among common species. The Red-winged Blackbird population has declined by 92 million. A quarter of all Blue Jays have also disappeared.

Habitat loss, agricultural intensification and coastal disturbances were identified as primary culprits behind the crisis, all intensified by global environmental change.

“Birds are indicator species, serving as acutely sensitive barometers of environmental health,” write Fitzpatrick and Marra, “and their mass declines signal that the earth’s biological systems are in trouble.”

The study did find some good news, and in that news there is hope. Populations of North American ducks and geese have grown by 56 percent since 1970, according to the study, thanks in large measure to conservation initiatives spearheaded by the hunting population and organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, which have contributed substantially to wetlands acquisition and lobbied hard for laws to protect wetlands. Hunters are not the enemies of birds or birders. Waterfowl populations are booming today because of people who cared.

Beyond the rebound of waterfowl, populations of Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Peregrine Falcons and other raptors have increased by 15 million through conservation measures, including the banning of the pesticide DDT.

There are also simple things you can do every day to make things better for birds. Keeping cats indoors, reducing plastic and pesticide use, landscaping with native

plants and “bird-proofing” your windows are common-sense steps every one of us can take.

We are blessed in the Lowcountry with magnificent birds and places to enjoy them. The loss of herons and egrets from our landscape would be unimaginable. While the crisis facing birds is one of global proportions, protecting them in our own back yard is well within our power, ensuring that this signature element of Lowcountry beauty is here for generations to enjoy.

Jane Hester is president of Hilton Head Audubon. John Bloomfield is vice president, and a member of the Audubon South Carolina Advisory Board.

This story was originally published September 24, 2019 10:12 AM.

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