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The canary next door: Shrinking bird populations warn us to take environmental action

It was 55 years ago that Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" warned of birds disappearing. It's happening. Here's what we can do.



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AP

By Elizabeth Gehrman | JULY 06, 2017

I recently bought a white-noise machine for my night stand. Not because I live on a busy street or my neighbors are loudmouths, but because of an otherwise welcome harbinger of spring: bird song. First, an American robin, *Turdus migratorius*, set up shop in the tree behind my house, whistling riotously for a mate in the predawn hours. For a few days I just hoped the little *Turdus* would *migratorius* to another tree, but when he was joined by a worm-eating warbler, I gave up and dropped the 50 bucks at Bed Bath & Beyond. A girl needs her beauty rest.

But I hate to be churlish, because as Rachel Carson wrote in her seminal 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, someday the sounds of nature might stop completely. Carson's dark vision of such a day jump-started a grass-roots movement that by 1972 had led to the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency and the banning of the pesticide DDT. While things are looking up for many avian species, numerous others face alarming new threats. One study released last year showed that North American land-bird populations have declined by about 13 percent since 1970; another asserted that 37 percent of our bird species are of "high conservation concern" and at risk of extinction.

Along the Atlantic flyway — a migration route stretching from Greenland and the Arctic to the tip of South America — tens of millions of birds are killed annually by hitting buildings, cellphone towers, and wind turbines, and by an

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degradation hampers reproduction, so that each new generation shrinks, threatening the species' survival. For the hundreds of bird species that rely on forest cover during part of their life cycle — often when breeding — forest fragmentation is largely to blame, and it's happening right here in New England.

"A lot of species are area-sensitive," says Jeffrey Ritterton, a bird conservation fellow with Mass Audubon. "They need a minimum area of uninterrupted habitat. That area's being broken apart."

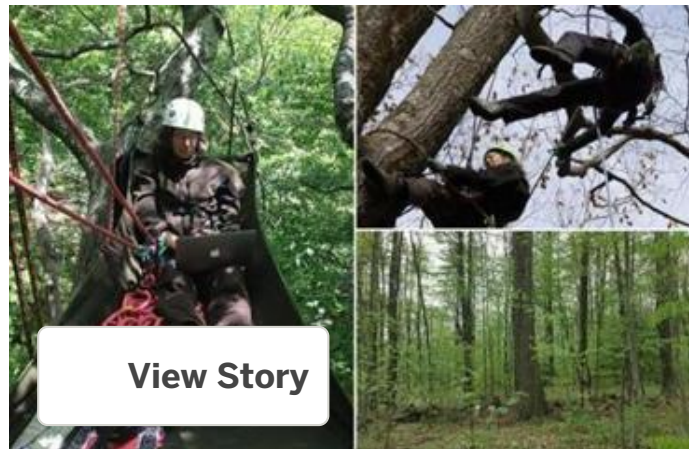
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The more often large tracts of land are divided, the more “edge” the remaining forests will have. That increases forest-dwelling birds’ vulnerability to predation and isolates them, inhibiting their movement to other patches of canopy as they’re outcompeted by others of their own species. Many types of birds “won’t cross large parking lots, for example,” Ritterson says.



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Across New England, 70 to 80 percent of land is privately held. About a quarter of the total

landmass is developed; in Massachusetts, another quarter of the state's almost 5 million acres is permanently protected. But as the rest of the land gets handed down through generations, the likelihood that it will be sold and developed increases. Conservation restrictions and the state's Chapter 61 program provide tax breaks for owners conserving their land for agriculture, open space, or sustainable forestry, but clearly these programs are not enough: Massachusetts loses on average 13 acres a day to asphalt and concrete, a 14 percent increase from the early 1980s.

A bill recently passed by Vermont's House of Representatives would limit or prohibit fragmentation of certain forestland, but, so far, the Commonwealth has not officially addressed this issue. And admittedly it's a sensitive one, with economic and population pressures always looming.

But if you own land and can afford longer-term payoffs over shorter-term financial gains, please consider it. Your grandchildren may thank you.

And as consumers, we can all use Forest Stewardship Council-approved wood products and support other sustainable forest industries, like maple sugaring and fall tourism. We can buy shade-grown coffee and reduce our consumption of paper, oil, and beef from the tropics to help limit forest fragmentation in those zones, where migrating birds winter. In Massachusetts, we can speak out on this issue and let our elected officials know where we stand. Keep an eye on upcoming legislation and call or write your state representative when something pertinent comes up — like two bills currently before the House: 443, which authorizes the establishment of old-growth forest reserves, and 1708, which restricts the state's purchase

of certain tropical-wood products — that will help save the woodlands our feathered friends depend on.

Why? Because most people, most of the time (though perhaps not 5 a.m.) like bird song. Because ecosystems are sensitive, and even if we don't know the downstream effects of losing a single species, they are often legion. And because birds are a sentinel species: They're more sensitive than humans to changes in the environment, but the dangers they face will eventually reach us, too. "In general," says Ritterson, "what's good for birds is good for other wildlife in the ecosystem. And we're all dependent on those ecosystems."

Protecting the earth shouldn't be a political issue. But with a national rollback of many environmental regulations now in the works, a dire endgame scenario is looking more likely. We must listen to the messages being sent by the birds before, as Rachel Carson predicted, they are silenced forever. As worries go, it's one worth losing sleep over.

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Elizabeth Gehrman is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com. Follow us on Twitter [@BostonGlobeMag](https://twitter.com/BostonGlobeMag).

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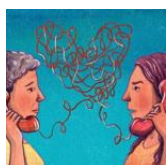
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