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FEATURED

Wing and a Prayer: We can stop the decline in bird populations ... if we try

By James Mayse Messenger-Inquirer Sep 29, 2019

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We live in the age of catastrophic scientific reports.

Studies on climate change, plastic pollution, fires in the Amazon rain forest and other disasters seem to arrive weekly now, and those can be difficult to read. It's understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that people feel helpless when confronted with calamities they feel they can do little about.

Last week, when a major report documented a massive loss of birds in the United States and Canada over the last 49 years, it might have felt like another problem with no solution. The study, which was conducted by scientists in the U.S. and Canada, found there has been a net loss of 2.9 billion birds since 1970. That means, even with new birds being born each year, almost 3 billion more birds have died than have been replaced.

"The study is now supporting what we are all witnessing and experiencing in our own lives," said Jordan Rutter, director of public relations for American Bird Conservancy. The finding that bird populations were declining was not a surprise, but "it's the number that's shocking," Rutter said.

"We're talking blue jays, grackles and blackbirds," she said. The study found more than a 29% decline in the bird population since 1970, with grassland birds suffering a 53% population loss, according to the American Bird Conservancy website.

But there isn't a need for despair. Experts on birds and nature said there are steps people can take at their own homes that can help birds rebound. A lot of the steps, such as planting hardy native plants like sunflowers, aren't all that difficult.

"We ... plant a lot of sunflowers," said Bill Tyler, of the Western Kentucky Botanical Garden. "They are easy, too. and the birds love them.

"The bird population should be a concern to all of us," Tyler said. "Trying to maintain some habitats is good for us and good for the birds."

So, why should you care about birds?

Birds aren't just pretty. They play a role in everything around you.

"They provide what we call 'ecosystem services' to the globe," said Noah Ashley, a professor of biology with Western Kentucky University. "Birds will be crucial in pollinating different species of plants."

Flying birds drop seeds far and wide, spreading plants, and flying from plant to plant distributes pollen, said Shelby Hall, natural resources director for Wesselman Nature Society in Evansville. "They fill a huge role in forests and any habitat you can think of," Hall said. "A lot of plants are incredibly dependent on birds."

Also, if you don't like pests like mosquitoes, birds such as swallows, chimney swifts and nighthawks have you covered.

"They all eat hundreds of mosquitoes every day," Rutter said.

Hummingbirds and purple martins are also big on eating mosquitoes.

And, while it may not be pleasant to think about, birds such as vultures help clean up the environment by eating dead animals that would otherwise be a hazard.

"They are the clean-up crew of nature," Rutter said. "We really do need them to deal with carrion ... They are actually helping with disease management. We'd have a public health concern if we didn't have birds."

Do you really need to spray that bug?

While butterflies are pretty (and important, but we're here to talk about birds), it's no exaggeration that a lot of people don't like bugs. There's a reason there are so many killer spider horror movies, after all, and one of the most terrifying "X-Files" episodes ever dealt with seemingly killer cockroaches (they weren't actually killers, but let's move on).

But if the sight of a bug on your doorstep has you reaching for the insecticide can, stop for a moment and think.

"The first question we always ask is, 'Is this actually a problem?' " said Matthew Springer, an assistant extension professor of wildlife management at the University of Kentucky. The question people should ask themselves before spraying is whether "just seeing bugs around your house is actually a problem, or is it something you can deal with," he said.

While pesticides sprayed around homes might kill the insects you don't like, "there's an indirect effect of pesticides that kill off the bugs used to feed birds," Ashley said.

When people contemplate using pesticides and herbicides like weedkillers on their lawns, people should "go into the conversation knowing that you don't know everything," Hall said.

"There are residual components in these things," he said. Herbicides can stay in lawns or on plants, and can leach into water supplies.

"You have to ask yourself, 'What's my intention here?'" Hall said. "... If I don't want (any) bugs, I'm not going to get birds, either."

Hall said when using bug and weed killers, "follow the label to a 'T.' "

People might compromise, Springer said, by "focusing on keeping (insects) out of my house," and not spraying for bugs outdoors.

Pesticides are not just limited to what you spray, but include what you eat. Rutter said a way to limit the use of pesticides is to buy organic produce that has not been treated with pesticides.

"Organic is much more mainstream. It's an option and people want organic," Rutter said. "... Now people are saying, 'If I'm eating organic, my pet should eat organic, too."

"If pesticides are not good for us and our pets, why would we think they're OK at such high doses on the landscape?" he said.

Here, kitty kitty

Cats are pretty amazing. They're adorable, fun-loving and they have a way of working their way into people's hearts.

But, when released outdoors, cats are killing machines.

"Domestic cats are the No. 1 predator for birds," Ashley said. "They kill 2.4 billion birds a year. I don't think people realize the impact cats have."

A discussion about what to do with feral cats is difficult, because it's emotional, and the goal here is not to pit bird lovers against cat fans. So, instead, let's focus on what experts say we should do with the pet cats that spend so much time with us every day.

The experts are unanimous: Pet cats should be kept indoors to prevent them from taking their toll on bird populations.

"Cats are not part of the natural world" in the United States, Hall said. "Cats are not part of the ecosystem, and because of that, they're taking over."

"The comment about cats, at least from (American Bird Conservancy), is we are not anti-cat," Rutter said. "We are not here to say one type of animal is better than another ... but it's time for the U.S. to be responsible pet owners."

If dogs ran loose killing other animals, their owners would panic, but in the U.S. and Canada "cats and dogs are not treated the same," Rutter said.

To look at it another way, keeping cats indoors is not only good for birds, but it's also good for the cat. A cat outdoors faces risks pet owners don't like, such as being killed by vehicles or other animals, ingesting poisons, contracting diseases like feline leukemia and coming into contact with toxoplasmosis parasites, which can be transmitted to humans and are especially dangerous to women who are pregnant.

"We are not asking people to get rid of their cats," Ashley said. "We are just asking them to keep them indoors."

Springer agreed domestic cats should not be outdoors because of the impact they have on birds and small mammals. If people do have domestic cats outdoors, they should not put out bird feeders to attract birds to their yards, Springer said.

"It makes sense you don't have a bird feeder in your yard so birds are coming" to the cat, Springer said. "That's a death sentence."

Native, native, native

One of the reasons nesting grassland birds populations have declined so dramatically is because there's simply less grassland in the United States than there used to be. Certainly, the conversion of grasslands into farm fields has played a large role, but bird habitats have also been lost when people pull out plants and exchange them for flat, uniform green lawns.

The average person can help preserve large grasslands by donating to organizations that are purchasing grasslands to maintain bird habitats. Closer to home, people can help birds by creating habitat space in their yards and planting trees and plants that attract birds and insects.

"Habitat loss is a primary concern," Ashley said. "What we can do as citizens is have a habitat in our backyard."

But, you can't just plant the first colorful plant you come across at the nursery. The plants and trees you put in your yard need to part of the region's natural ecosystem.

"Native plants have so many other benefits" beyond just helping bird populations, Rutter said. "Many are really helpful in terms of water (conservation) and preventing erosion."

Lists of native plants can be found online. The National Audubon Society website, for example, has a search engine where people can find plants native to their area by city and ZIP code.

"When you plant a diversity of plants, that (plant) might bring in certain birds and this plant might draw insects," Hall said. "If you just make your yard a pollinator garden and do as many native species as possible, you're benefiting the birds."

Native trees such as oaks are good for many bird species, and plants such as milkweed, bird balm and sunflowers are bird, butterfly and insect attractors. Tyler said the botanical garden has worked to create bird and wildlife habitat by keeping areas of native grassland, planting sunflowers and milkweed, and putting up houses for purple martins.

"We encourage people to do all sorts of gardening and plant all sorts of plants," he said.

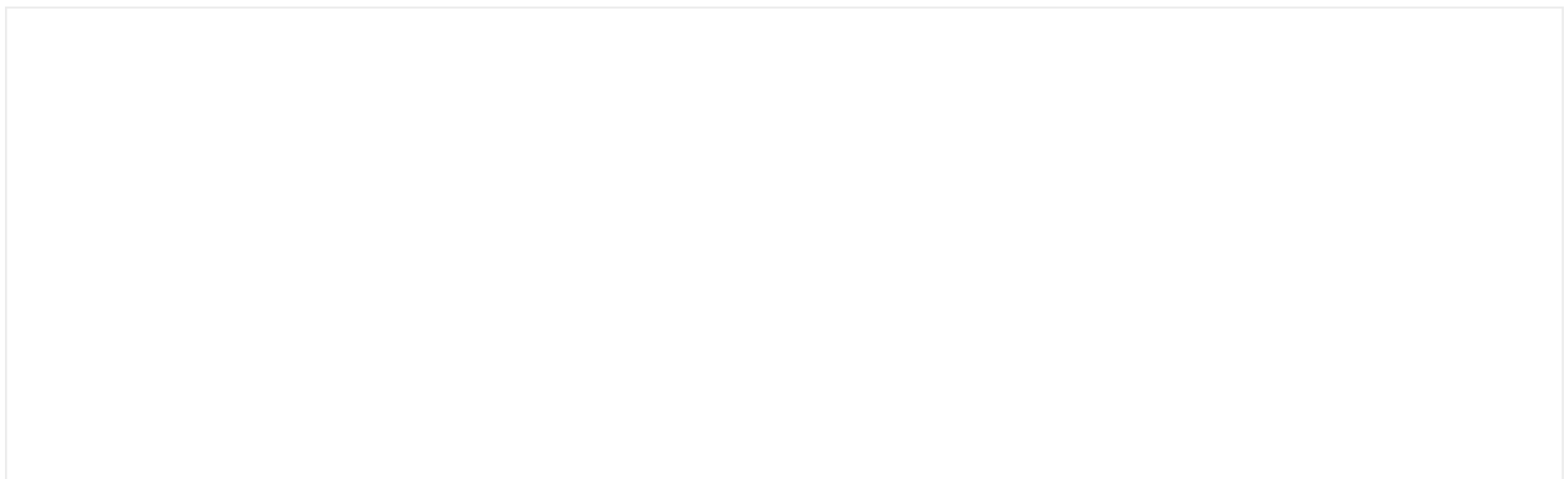
Tyler agreed people should stick with native plants to draw in bird and insects that birds eat. Planting local plants and wildflowers is a "win-win" for people and birds.

"You certainly don't want to bring in any exotics," Tyler said.

How to help birds in a nutshell

- Plant native plants that birds like: Local plants that feed or shelter birds, or draw insects area birds like to eat, are essential. Keeping some grassland for birds to nest in helps as well. For a list of native plants, check the Audubon Native Plants Database, www.audubon.org/native-plants.
- Cut back on herbicide and pesticide use: Killing every bug on your property results in wiping out bird food sources. Also, herbicides and pesticides sprayed outdoors can end up in water supplies, affecting all sorts of wildlife. Use wisely and sparingly, and always follows the directions on the bottle.
- Keep cats indoors: While cats are amazing, domestic cats let outdoors kill more than 2 billion birds in the U.S. annually. Keeping your cat inside will save bird lives. It could also be healthier for the cat. If you want that outdoor experience for your cat that's still safe for birds, look into building an enclosed "catio."
- Cut down on plastic: Birds, like sea creatures, can mistake plastic for food. The American Bird Conservancy recommends avoiding single-use plastics, like bottles, bags and plastic utensils.
- Consider purchasing bird-friendly coffee: The ABC reports coffee plantations that rely on plants grown in the sun destroy habitats for birds and other wildlife. But "shade-grown" coffee preserves bird habitats. The Smithsonian certifies bird-friendly coffee brands, which can be bought on-line. Visit www.nationalzoo.si.edu/migratory-birds/bird-friendly-coffee.

Video and Slideshows



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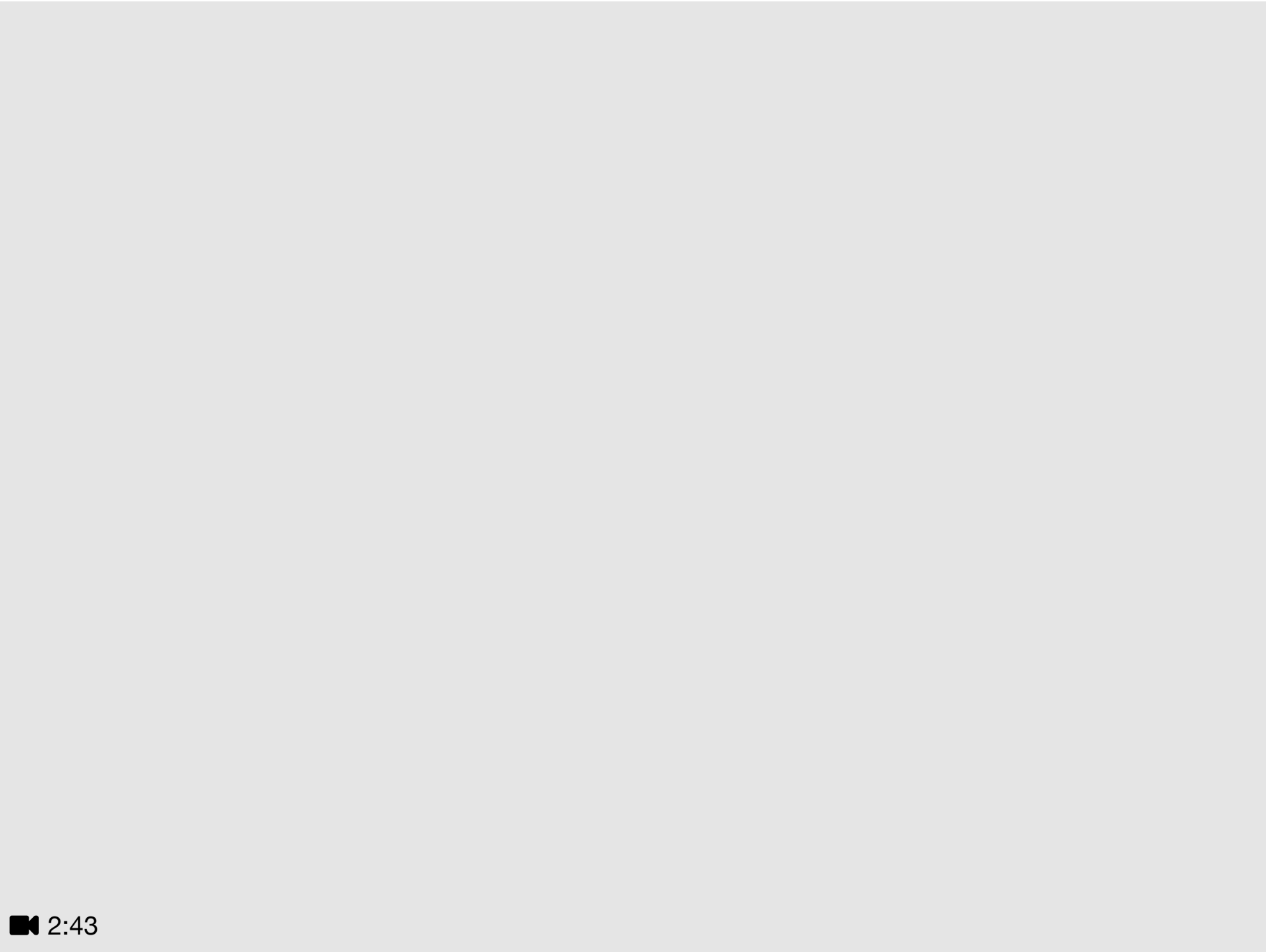
KSP jail incident

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OPD lip sync challenge



County fair in full swing



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A look inside Brescia University's Moore Center

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