

Habitat: There for the Birds!



More and more species in Ontario, across Canada and around the world are at risk for significant reductions in their populations – and indeed, for complete extinction. Major threats to wildlife and plants include pollution, habitat loss, exotic and predatory species, persecution and other human-created interferences such as roads, buildings and power lines. This means that while human activity is almost totally to blame for the decline of most species in the world today, we as a species also hold the power to ensure their survival.

Renfrew County Bird Species at Risk

Of the 479 bird species that have been seen in Ontario, 300 live in Renfrew County, seasonally or year-round. Of the Renfrew County birds, thirteen are categorized as species at risk (see chart below for specific category definitions as of September 2008). Please note that categorization of at-risk species changes over time. In fact, the Red-shouldered hawk, formerly a Special Concern species, was removed from this list as recently as June 2008.

Status Categories and Definitions for Renfrew County Bird Species at Risk

OMNR STATUS		DEFINITION
EXT	Extinct Passenger Pigeon	A species that no longer exists anywhere.
EXP	Extirpated Greater Prairie-Chicken	A species that no longer exists in the wild in Ontario but occurs elsewhere.
END	Endangered Kirtland's Warbler Loggerhead Shrike Bald Eagle Golden Eagle Barn Owl	A species facing imminent extinction or extirpation in Ontario that has been regulated under Ontario's Endangered Species Act (ESA).
THR	Threatened Peregrine Falcon Chimney swift (<i>nationally</i>) Least bittern	A species that is at risk of becoming endangered in Ontario if limiting factors are not reversed.
SC	Special Concern [formerly Vulnerable] Red-headed Woodpecker Black Tern Cerulean Warbler Short-eared Owl Golden-winged Warbler (<i>in Ontario, THR nationally</i>)	A species with characteristics that make it sensitive to human activities or natural events.

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Birds and the Ecosystem

Birds play an important role in Earth's ecosystem. Like all wildlife, each bird species requires a specific habitat that provides the biotic – living – components required for surviving and thriving, including:

- food: berries, seeds, nuts, insects, reptiles, amphibians, fish and small mammals
- shelter from the elements, nesting sites and predators: plants, trees, wetlands
- nesting materials: small sticks, grasses
- mates: for reproduction.

Birds also need abiotic – non-living – habitat components, such as:

- water: to drink, swim and groom
- nesting sites, shelter from the elements and predators: cliffs, sand banks
- nesting materials: mud
- Earth's magnetic field: to navigate during migration.

Importance of Birds

Birds are mysterious strangers of nature: their songs and colours are integral elements of our outdoors, yet they are not easy to spot. Most Renfrew County birds are migrants that live here only in the warmer months, then fly south when the weather turns colder. Some merely pass through on their way to habitats elsewhere.

In the short time they do spend with us each year, birds provide effective, natural and cost-free pest control through the consumption of insects and rodents. They also play a key role in the pollination of wild and domestic plants and trees, and they collect and disperse seeds – sometimes to the chagrin of fussy gardeners. Birds are known to be indicators of environmental health, and by studying their populations we can learn a great deal about the effects of various human-made threats such as forest fragmentation, pollution and global warming on that environmental health. Birds also add beauty to our lives through their melodic songs, colourful plumage and aerial aerobatics – all vital survival mechanisms for the birds.

It's no wonder then that we have integrated them into our society as everything from natural icons and cultural symbols, to creative muses and contemporary marketing brands. But it is vital that we view all birds as intrinsic to Earth's biodiversity, and take concrete steps towards protecting their habitats and preventing additional bird species from extinction.



How We Can Help Protect Birds

Habitat protection is one of the most important factors in preventing bird species from becoming extinct. Together we can make a direct and significant difference in bird population stability by donating to organizations that protect these habitats, or by positively affecting bird habitat nearby or around the world:

- Buy shade-grown coffee. Shaded coffee plantations increase tropical forest habitat for birds. This coffee is available from:
 - Birds and Beans www.birdsandbeans.ca
 - Ethical Bean www.ethicalbean.com
 - Nabob www.nabob.ca sells coffee containing at least 30% of beans grown on Rainforest Alliance-certified shade-grown farms
- When buying produce or coffee, choose the shade-grown organic option. Shade-grown coffee plantations provide habitat for birds in their wintering grounds. Organic produce is grown without pesticides making it safer for birds, farmers and consumers.
- When buying wood and paper products, try to buy those that are certified (e.g. by the Forest Stewardship Council). Certification promotes sustainable forestry practices and protection of habitat.
- Choose recycled disposable paper products that are unbleached when possible. Chlorine bleach pollutes bird habitats; recycled products reduce pressure on forests and increases habitats for birds.
- Plant trees and native vegetation to provide shelter, breeding habitat and food sources for our feathered friends.
- Erect bird houses or nesting boxes on your property. Contact a local conservation group for ideas or find a plan on the Internet.
- Participate in projects that monitor bird populations and the factors that affect them.
- Maintain dead trees – snags – on your property where it is safe to do so. Snags provide prime habitat for insects that attract birds and other wildlife.
- In early spring, set out nest-building materials such as yarn, cotton balls and thin strips of fabric.
- Do not allow pet cats to run free as they are a major source of mortality for birds, especially fledglings. Keeping cats indoors or in an outdoor enclosure during warm times of year is best for birds and cats.
- Hang a winter birdfeeder outside, but be sure to keep it filled all winter long. Birds in the area will come to depend on this food source.
- Maintain a birdbath all year round. In summer, remember to change the water every few days to avoid mosquito larvae. Heated containers are available for winter.
- Turn off overnight office lights, especially during peak migration periods. Migrating birds become attracted/distracted by the lights, and are killed when they fly into windows of skyscrapers.
- Hang suncatchers or decals on your windows to prevent birds from flying into the glass panes: <http://windowalert.com>

Since small acts by many people can mean the difference between stable or declining birds populations, it is important to educate others on the difference each one of us can make to help save our birds – and Earth's ecosystem.

Poor indeed is the garden in which birds find no homes.

Abram L. Urban

