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# Editorial: Seeing the light on high rate of bird deaths in Chicago

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD  
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FEEDBACK



A bird flies past McCormick Place on June 6, 2021, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

When you see a robin hunting for bugs in your lawn, a finch snacking at your feeder or a hawk soaring overhead, you may think that birds have a pretty good life. But our feathered friends are in trouble — serious trouble.

Today, there are nearly **3 billion fewer birds** in the United States and Canada than there were in 1970 — a drop of 29% in just 50 years. David Yarnold, president and chief executive of the National Audubon Society, calls the decline **“a full-blown crisis.”**

The good news is that there are many things we can do to allow birds to thrive and multiply, rather than keep them dwindling toward extinction. And some of those measures would require little sacrifice. Bird adoration during the pandemic soared for many of us, stuck indoors or working from home — appreciating more deeply the nature outside our sills. So what can we do to protect the bird population?

The causes of bird mortality are many, including loss of habitat to development and farming, predation by cats, use of pesticides and climate change. Curtailing those broad-based threats is a project that would take a lot of time and money.

**But there is another cause that is more local and more tractable**, right here in Chicago: the nightly illumination of the McCormick Place Lakeside Center. Occupying a long stretch of the Lake Michigan waterfront, the enormous glass-and-steel convention complex is one reason Chicago is among the nation’s deadliest cities for migrating birds. Confused and attracted by large expanses of bright windows, birds often fly into them, with fatal consequences.

FEEDBACK

A new study in the scholarly journal PNAS, published by the National Academy of Sciences, found that **turning off just half the lights** at McCormick Place each evening would reduce bird deaths by 60%. For decades, Field Museum staffers and volunteers have visited the center each morning during the spring and fall migration seasons to collect and document dead birds found on the ground. The scientists who did this study based their calculation partly on the notable decline in those numbers when the convention center was closed during the pandemic.

On nights when the windows were dark, the number of fatal collisions during the spring was 11 times lower than on nights when the windows were lit, and 6 times lower in the fall. “The sheer strength of the link between lighting and collisions was surprising,” said

Benjamin Van Doren, a postdoctoral associate at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and lead author of the study. “It speaks to the exciting potential to save birds simply by reducing light pollution.”

**Chicago has already taken practical steps to reduce bird deaths.** In 1995, the city started its Lights Out program, encouraging building owners and managers to lower or douse outdoor lights. But it’s now apparent that interior lights also pose a hazard. And if you’ve been downtown early on a weekend, you might have noticed bird “medics” trying to collect and save birds on the ground, in distress. The volunteers post signs in their parked car windows pleading not to be towed while they scour the sidewalks for birds that can be saved.

So what more can we do? “We can save birds simply by turning off lights during a handful of high-risk days each spring and fall,” Van Doren [told Michigan News](#). “By adapting our existing public migration forecasts to identify nights with high collision risk, we will be able to issue targeted lights-out advisories several days in advance.”

Humans love birds, but our fondness has not always been accompanied by an appreciation of what they need to survive and flourish. Let’s cut the lights and speed their safe passage.

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