

OPINION

Birds are disappearing. Here's what we can do about it. | Opinion

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A view of Detroit skyline from a second-floor window in the three-story Book Cadillac penthouse for sale in downtown Detroit on Tuesday, March 26, 2019. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Our birds are disappearing.

A recent study by [Science Magazine](https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/09/three-billion-north-american-birds-have-vanished-1970-surveys-show) showed that 30% of North American birds (<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/09/three-billion-north-american-birds-have-vanished-1970-surveys-show>) have disappeared over the past 50 years. Even common species such as sparrows, robins, and blue jays have experienced huge losses.

Birds pollinate flowers, keep insects under control and signal the health of ecosystems. They add beauty and wonder to our environment. Detroit is blessed with a great richness in bird life. The Detroit River is a globally recognized migratory bird flyway. The city hosts 300 different species of birds throughout the year. Unfortunately, the journeys of many birds are cut short as they die in collisions with the city's buildings downtown and elsewhere. In urban areas, collisions with buildings alone [kill an estimated billion birds per year in North America](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/stop-blaming-cats-as-many-as-988-million-birds-die-annually-in-window-collisions/2014/02/03/9837fe80-8866-11e3-916e-e01534b1e132_story.html) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/stop-blaming-cats-as-many-as-988-million-birds-die-annually-in-window-collisions/2014/02/03/9837fe80-8866-11e3-916e-e01534b1e132_story.html).

Birds often fly into buildings when they see the surrounding trees and sky reflected by glass facades, or as they try to get to the other side of see-through corridors, thus dying a violent death. At night, building lights will disorient a bird's navigation system causing it to fly in circles and die from exhaustion.



This Nashville Warbler is believed to have died after running into a local mid-rise housing development. (Photo: Diane Cheklich, Detroit Audubon)

Fortunately, there are many ways to prevent bird-building collisions. One is to turn building lights off at night or draw shades over windows. This “dark sky” strategy has the potential to prevent 80% of nighttime bird deaths. Turning lights off also saves money on energy and maintenance for building owners.

Since 1999, Audubon chapters, in partnership with local groups, have organized voluntary “Lights Out” programs in many cities including Detroit, Atlanta, Cleveland and Chicago. In May, Portland, Ore., adopted a municipal Dark Skies Initiative to reduce light pollution.

Another solution is to treat glass panes on buildings to eliminate reflections and reduce transparency with products that are readily available in the marketplace. Cities could also require that new buildings use bird-safe glass, as Toronto, Canada, recently did.

Toronto Green Standard is the city’s sustainable design guidance for new private and city-owned developments. The standard consists of four tiers of performance measures that promote sustainable site and building design. To gain planning approval, buildings must meet Tier 1 requirements, which include measures to minimize bird collision as well as light pollution.

In May 2017, the City of Detroit signed on to the Urban Conservation Treaty for Migratory Birds, created by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In the treaty, municipal governments and their partners pledge to protect birds from the hazards they face, including building collisions. Detroit, it is time to deliver on the agreement!

Detroit Audubon calls on city officials and residents to rise to the urgent challenge of saving and protecting our birds. The city should adopt ordinances and codes to require that new buildings are safe for birds. It should enact other measures to encourage collision deterrence and “lights out” operation.

Residents could also help by growing native plants, reducing or eliminating pesticide use, and keeping cats indoors. These proven strategies can prevent bird deaths and help restore dangerously depleted populations. Let’s work together to save our birds!

Diane Cheklich, and Heidi Trudell are members of the Detroit Audubon’s Safe Passage Committee. Kami Pothukuchi is Distinguished Service Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Wayne State University. Learn more at www.detroitaudubon.org. (<http://www.detroitaudubon.org>).

Editor’s note: This guest column has been updated to correct Kami Pothukuchi’s title.

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