

# Green Scene: The State of our Birds

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The first report on the state of Canada's birds, released this June, contains both good and bad news. Based on data gathered over 40 years from volunteer initiatives such as the Christmas bird counts and breeding bird surveys as well as data from biologists, the report provides a snapshot of how well the birds of Canada are doing. With a total of 451 bird species appearing regularly in Canada and relying on a wide variety of habitats, it's not surprising that some species are doing well while others are facing troubling declines (to read the report, see [www.stateofcanadasbirds.org](http://www.stateofcanadasbirds.org)).

One of the reasons to gather such data is that the relative abundance of bird species is a good indication of general ecosystem health. In addition, birds have both economic and social values with bird-watching increasing in popularity as a tourism-related activity and a general growing awareness of the need to protect the natural world. The bird species that forage on insects provide direct economic benefits to farmers and foresters by helping to keep insect pests under control. In fact, Canada's first legislation to protect birds, the International Migratory Bird Convention, was passed in 1916, in part, to protect the bird species identified by farmers as important allies in their efforts to grow crops.

Raptors, i.e., birds of prey, are the group showing the largest population increase (just over 50%) in the past 40 years. While this increase is encouraging, it's likely due mainly to the 1972 banning of DDT and other harmful persistent pesticides. Decades ago, when these pesticides were commonly used, raptor populations declined significantly as these birds accumulated toxic metabolites in their bodies and were unable to reproduce. The elimination of these pesticides is slowly allowing raptors to regain their former abundance.

Habitat loss continues to be the main reason for significant declines in many groups of birds. In the prairies and BC interior, grassland species have suffered some of the largest declines (about 40%). New agricultural practices now leave little of the natural prairie habitat these birds require for nesting. On the Pacific coast, shorebird populations are also in trouble. Global warming may be forcing changes in the ocean and decreasing the availability of their food but shoreline development is thought to be a major cause in their declines. For example, the proposed expansion of Port Metro Vancouver could result in significant losses to the remaining habitat in the Fraser delta which is so critical for millions of migratory shorebirds. The State of Canada's Birds report notes 70% of the areas identified as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) have little or no formal protection. The Fraser delta, one of Canada's most significant IBAs, lacks adequate protection.

**Nighthawks are "aerial insectivores". They typically roost during the day on the ground or in trees where they blend in with the colour of bark and dried leaves. At dusk, they emerge to catch insects.**

*Bruce Brandhorst photo*

The group of birds lyrically described as the "aerial insectivores" have decreased more than any other group with alarming population declines in some instances of



over 80%. These birds include the swallows, swifts, and nighthawks that catch insects, including mosquitoes, on the wing. A contributing factor to their worrying declines could be their long annual migrations which forces these birds to rely on habitat in several countries to successfully complete their life cycle. For example, the State of Canada's Birds report shows the birds which migrate long distances are decreasing faster than the 22% of Canadian species that remain in Canada year-round. Barn swallows were regularly observed in my Port Moody neighborhood in the early 1990s. Even in areas that should be ideal for them such as Colony Farm Regional Park, they are now significantly less abundant. Clearly, research is urgently needed to better understand why these beneficial birds are in such trouble. Locally, we should be taking action to protect and enhance their nesting sites.

The most stunning success story in the recovery of an endangered bird species is the whooping crane. In 1938, only 15 individuals remained due to both hunting and habitat loss. Back then, the location of their summer nesting site was still a mystery. Today, thanks to terrific international cooperation between the USA and Canada and the efforts of hundreds of individuals, these whooping cranes now number over 430 in the wild with another 160 in captivity. They remain a species at risk, however, and continue to face a number of threats. The largest wild flock winters along the Texas coast where recent droughts have diminished their food supply. In 1954, their main nesting site was accidentally discovered in Wood Buffalo National Park on the Alberta/Northwest Territories border. However, that means these magnificent birds must fly over the Fort McMurray area and a growing number of tar sand tailings ponds on their annual migrations to and from the Texas coast. I hope stormy conditions will never force them to the ground in this hazardous industrial area of Alberta.

Canada's first State of the Birds Report shows when governments take effective action, such as banning DDT or conserving whooping cranes, bird species can be saved. However, this report also points out the need for effective action for the species now facing precipitous and mysterious declines. Hopefully, the past will be prologue and governments of the day will again act to protect the species currently at risk.