Audubon

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CONSERVATION

A Sweeping New Report Shows U.S. Birds Declining Sharply Across a Range of Habitats

Scientists checked in on species all over the country for the latest State of the Birds report. Nearly everywhere they looked, birds were struggling—including some that have been resilient in the past.

The report finds grassland birds such as Western Meadowlarks have suffered the steepest declines of any habitat group, losing 43 percent of their populations since 1970. Photo: Mary Perry/Audubon Photography Awards

Whether they hop around the prairie, dabble in wetlands, flit through forests, or forage along the shore, birds are suffering rapid population declines across the United States.

That's the finding from the latest State of the Birds report, a status check on the country's avian life published every few years by a coalition of science and conservation groups, including Audubon. The 2025 report shows that birds across most habitats have suffered major losses since 1970. Grassland and aridland species have been dealt the heaviest blow: Both groups lost more than 40 percent of their total populations over that period.

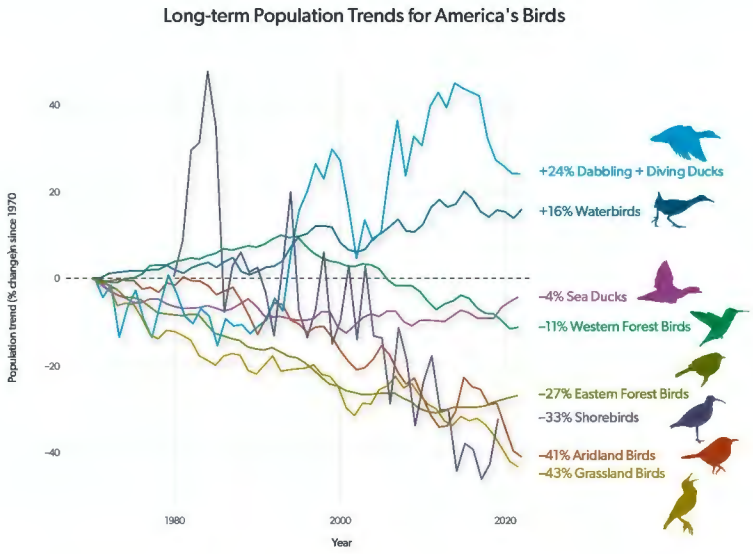
What's more, the trends for many habitat groups have gotten worse. Even waterfowl, which had previously been a conservation bright spot amid the alarming declines, have seen their numbers drop since the last edition of the report. Overall, around one-third of U.S. birds, or 229 species, are of high or moderate conservation concern, according to the report—dealing with low population levels, declining trends, or other threats that call for conservation action to

step up.

"It's a reality check for us, every time we do one of these," says Mike Brasher, a senior waterfowl scientist at Ducks Unlimited and co-chair of the report's science committee. "It reminds us that the threats to birds [and] bird habitat are as great now as they have ever been, and they're accelerating, in most cases."

The State of the Birds report, which has been published since 2009, pulls together data from a range of bird monitoring programs to understand how birds are faring across different ecosystems. Those data sources include the U.S. Geological Survey's Breeding Bird Survey, Audubon's Christmas Bird Count, and, as of this year, eBird Trends maps. Much of this monitoring is built on the efforts of community scientists, who are the "eyes on the ground" to show when bird populations are changing, says the report's science committee chair Amanda Rodewald, a conservation biologist at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "This report is powered by people," Rodewald says.

see my 2024 Christmas Bird Count video, linked from our course website



Graphic: Courtesy of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

an extractable asset, imo

This year's installment signals that despite the renewed attention to conservation after the 2019 "3 billion birds" study—a wake-up call that found North America has lost around a quarter of its avian population since 1970—the trajectory for birds has not turned around. "We're showing that even five-plus years later, America continues to lose birds," Rodewald says. "And we are seeing the same sort of patterns."

linked from our web syllabus

For one, grassland birds have remained in dire straits as their habitat has disappeared, often converted for agriculture. Despite efforts to preserve or restore prairie habitat, such as Audubon's partnerships with ranchers to promote bird-friendly grazing practices, the Great Plains region is losing 1 to 2 million acres of grasslands each year

to 2 million acres of grasslands each year—threatening species like the Mountain Plover and Baird's Sparrow. "We've had loss and degradation of all habitats, but grasslands have been hit the hardest," says Nicole Michel, director of quantitative science at the National Audubon Society, who worked on the grassland birds section of the report. "The tallgrass prairie really stands out as an area where there's a five-alarm fire."

Waterfowl, on the other hand, have seen a reversal in their fate—but in the wrong direction.

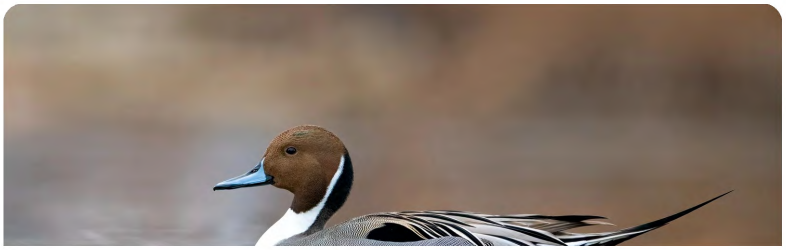
Meanwhile, long-suffering shorebirds have also continued to see declines, facing threats from rising and warming seas on top of coastal habitat losses across their expansive ranges. Some of these birds' migrations stretch all along the Western Hemisphere, highlighting the need to work across borders to conserve them, Rodewald says.

Out of all the habitat groups, shorebirds have the highest number of "tipping point"

species identified in the report—those that have lost more than half their populations in the past 50 years. “For various reasons, these birds have been slipping through the cracks,” says Ken Rosenberg, a conservation scientist with the Road to Recovery initiative who worked on the report. The 112 tipping point species, which range from Chimney Swifts to Black Rails, may need more targeted science efforts to figure out what’s driving their declines and how to turn them around, Rosenberg says.

Waterfowl, on the other hand, have seen a reversal in their fate—but in the wrong direction. These species had long been touted as a conservation success story, and their populations are still up 24 percent since 1970, largely due to expanded protections for wetlands. Yet since around 2017, that upward trajectory has seen a dip, and dabbling and diving duck populations are now 10 percent below their long-term averages, per the report.

a trend seen in my CBC trips to Lake Arivaca, Arizona



The Northern Pintail is called out in the report as a "tipping point" species in urgent need of conservation. After a long recovery, duck populations have taken a turn for the worse in recent years. Photo: Matthew Dolkart, Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library

That short-term decline is likely due in large part to drought in the Prairie Pothole Region, an area of the northern Plains that is crucial for breeding ducks, Brasher says. There's hope that ducks will get back on track when these weather cycles shift again, but the reversal is a sign that environmental groups can't get complacent, he says: "We can never take our foot off the gas and say we've succeeded in our conservation mission."

The report's authors say that, taken together, this year's findings drive home that conservation efforts do make a difference for birds—but that much more action is needed. "The status quo of conservation that's been practiced in the United States has not been adequate to recover the birds that we've lost," says Bradley Wilkinson, U.S. coordinator for the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, which leads the

report. "It may have prevented further declines, or it may be arresting more significant freefalls. But it's not doing enough to really bring birds back."

Still, Wilkinson is hopeful that the growing interest in birds and birding can help spur support for the kinds of investments birds need. As he points out, more than one-third of U.S. adults identify as birdwatchers, and the hobby has become a major economic driver across the country.

The continuing challenges for bird populations are also a warning sign for deeper environmental threats, Rodewald says. If these habitats are struggling to support bird species, it's a sign that they're not healthy for other wildlife, or even humans—but working to restore them will have benefits across ecosystems. "It's not a matter of: Which do we choose to help, birds or people?" Rodewald says. "The question is, really: How do we best serve both?"

BIRDS IN THIS STORY

Mountain Plover

PLOVERS

Baird's Sparrow

NEW WORLD SPARROWS

Chimney Swift

SWIFTS

Black Rail

RAILS, GALLINULES, COOTS