

The State of the Birds 2014

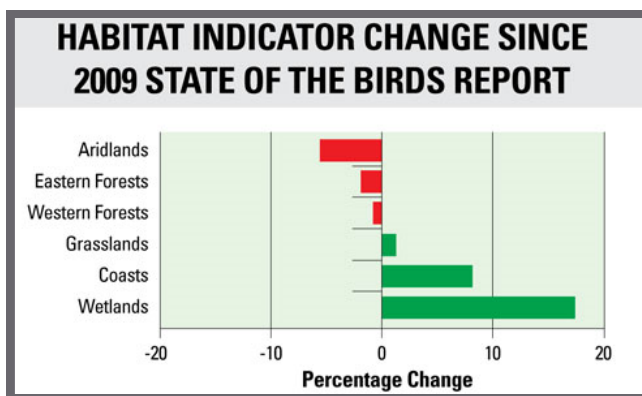
Wisconsin



Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative

Overview

Partners on the U.S. Committee of the [North American Bird Conservation Initiative](#) (NABCI) have issued the fifth in a [series of reports](#) on the state of our nation's birds. This [2014 State of the Birds](#) (SOTB) has three broad goals. The first is to serve as a '**report card**' on how birds are doing since the publication of the original 2009 report. The 2014 SOTB repeats the methods used in 2009 to report population trends for birds grouped by broad habitat categories and shows how these trends have changed over the five years.



Second, the report is a **bird conservation 'roadmap' and call to action**. Against the backdrop of the 100th anniversary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon, possibly the most abundant bird on earth whose populations nevertheless slid from several billion to zero in just 40 years, the report presents a Watchlist of 230 species most in need of conservation attention. Without immediate action, these species are headed for extinction. Many already appear on the federal Endangered Species list. The report also highlights 33 common bird species that are undergoing steep declines in many areas and underscores the need to keep common birds common while we still can. Third, the report includes numerous **success stories**, examples where conservation actions have produced

measurable population gains for birds. The message here is simple but powerful: ***investments in conservation work.***

Synopsis of Results

Overall, the 2014 SOTB presents a mixed picture. Conservation action has resulted in definite gains for some species and their habitats, but many others continue to decline and are in serious need of attention. Changing agricultural practices, development, exotic species, environmental pollutants, overexploitation of birds or their food sources, and climate change are the main culprits.

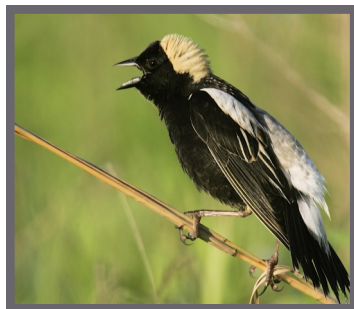
- Populations of birds associated with four out of five inland habitats – grasslands; aridlands (desert, sagebrush, etc.); eastern forests; western forests – continue to decline (though trends for grassland birds have edged up since the 2009 report; see graph, left). Only wetland birds have shown strong longer-term gains.
- Along our nation's coastlines, populations of some wintering birds (e.g., black turnstone; black oystercatcher) have increased while others (e.g., snowy plover; dunlin) remain in trouble. Meanwhile, numbers of long-distance migratory shorebirds (e.g., red knot; Hudsonian godwit; ruddy turnstone) are falling steeply and require international conservation attention.
- Over the oceans, surveys of some seabirds (e.g., Northern gannet; common murre) indicate stable or growing populations, while other species (e.g., Kittlitz's murrelet; Western gull) are decreasing.
- Island species, especially in Hawaii but also in Guam, the Marianas, American Samoa, and the Caribbean, are sliding towards extinction.

Wisconsin Bird Conservation in Action

With its heritage of conservation giants such as Aldo Leopold and John Muir, Wisconsin has long been recognized as a conservation leader. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the bird conservation community, where the [Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative \(WBCI\)](#) has been active in bird conservation for over a decade. The first of its kind in the U.S., WBCI is a state all-bird partnership modeled on NABCI. WBCI and its more than 175 partners around the state work to advance the full spectrum of bird conservation, from conservation planning to education and outreach. Many WBCI and partner efforts directly address priorities highlighted in the 2014 SOTB.

Grasslands

Nationally, grassland bird populations have shown some of the most precipitous declines of any bird group, falling by 40% since 1968. The 2014 SOTB reports that grassland bird populations overall have stabilized at low levels and some species, such as Henslow's sparrow, have shown gains in certain portions of their range. This reflects significant investments through Farm Bill conservation programs, though gains may prove ephemeral if these investments are not maintained. Other species, like Eastern meadowlark and bobolink, continue to decline due to changing agricultural practices and land uses. Recent



research has shown that grassland birds are sensitive to landscape-scale features; the more open the landscape and the higher the amount of grassland present, the better the birds do. The **WBCI Grasslands Committee** is applying this research in a strategic implementation plan that identifies the best ("grassiest") places across the state to focus management efforts for grassland birds, and is working with partners to "build" Grassland Bird Conservation Areas, local landscapes that combine areas of protected grassland habitat with working agricultural lands to maximize benefits for grassland birds.

Wetlands

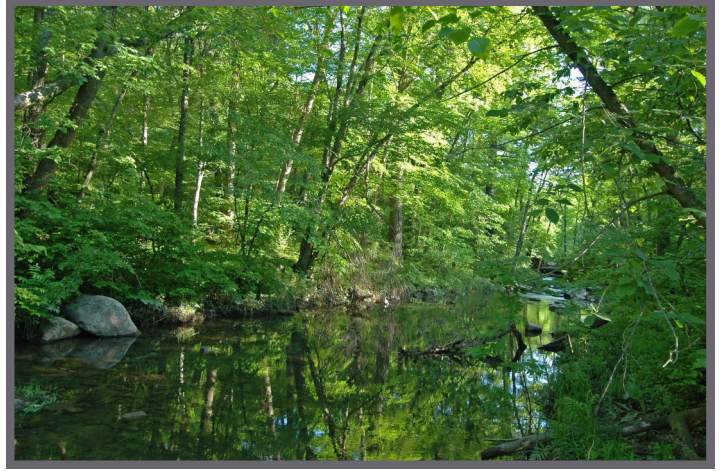


According to the 2014 SOTB, many wetland bird species have shown strong population gains particularly since the mid-1990's, reflecting the success of conservation efforts such as the Clean Water Act, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). **WBCI partners like WDNR and Ducks Unlimited** have been extremely successful in securing NAWCA grant dollars to protect and restore wetlands in Wisconsin. To date, some \$33 million in NAWCA funding has flowed to Wisconsin, which partner contributions have leveraged to \$106 million. These resources have been used to conserve over 144,000 acres of wetland and associated up-

land habitats. Such efforts have benefited the more than half of all Wisconsin birds that depend on wetlands for some portion of their lifecycle, including both breeding and migrating waterfowl, rails, terns, herons, and bitterns. Working with regional and federal partners, WBCI monitors populations of many of these species through its innovative [secretive marsh bird surveys](#), which have been conducted annually since 2008.

Forests

The 2014 SOTB reports that the eastern forest bird species showing the steepest declines are those dependent on either young forests or mature forests. The **WBCI Southern Forests Committee** is developing a landscape design for southern forests, concentrated in the Driftless Area of the southwest, which integrates areas for oak regeneration, benefitting early-successional species like ruffed grouse and blue-winged warbler, with management and protection of mature forest areas for species like wood thrush and cerulean warbler. An emphasis on maintaining forest cover will also benefit the many species of migrant landbirds that pass through this landscape in both spring and fall. In the north, the [Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership](#) has begun work with private landowners to create habitat for species such as American woodcock and golden-winged warbler. Meanwhile, federal Breeding Bird Survey data and monitoring on local national forest lands suggest that populations of many north woods species are doing well as northern forests recover from historic cutovers last century.



Shorebirds & Neotropical Migrant Landbirds

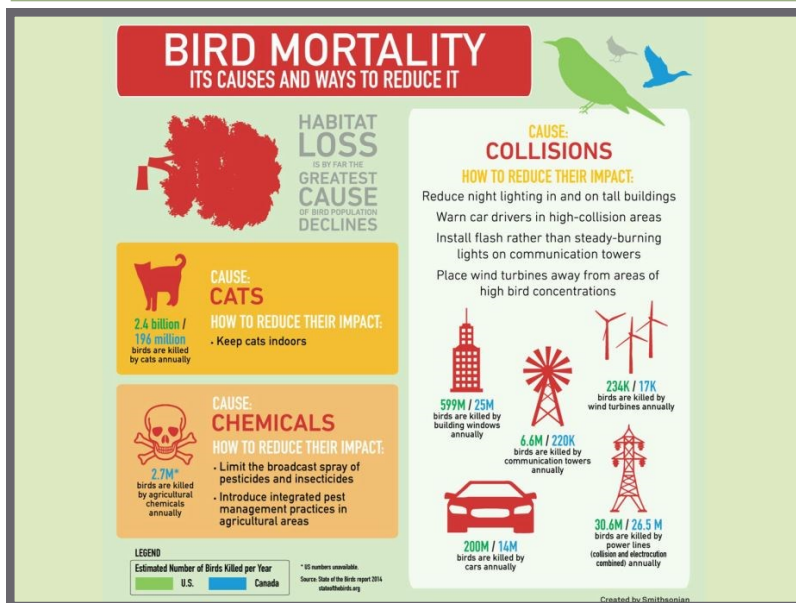
Over half of all U.S. shorebird species and 33 Neotropical migrant landbirds (NMLB; primarily songbirds that breed in North America and winter south of the U.S. border) are on the 2014 SOTB Watchlist. The two or three months that these birds spend on their northern breeding grounds represent only a small portion of their annual cycle; the rest of their time is spent traveling through and wintering in other states or other countries. Successful conservation must consider their needs during these non-breeding times. WBCI's emphasis on full-lifecycle conservation is helping to address the unique challenges presented by species that routinely cross state and national

boundaries. The [Wisconsin Stopover Initiative](#) is working to identify and protect critical migratory bird stopover sites along Wisconsin's Lake Michigan and Lake Superior basins. The [WBCI International Committee](#) works to raise funds for habitat protection in Latin American and Caribbean countries where the bulk of Wisconsin's NMLBs spend the winter. WBCI partners such as WDNR and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service also perform [drawdowns](#) at managed wetland complexes each year to create stopover habitat for migratory shorebirds.

Aerial Insectivores

Chimney swifts and common nighthawks are two species of birds in a group known as aerial insectivores (birds that catch insects on the wing). This group is highlighted on the 2014 SOTB's list of Common Birds in Decline. The [Wisconsin Chimney Swift Working Group](#), coordinated by WBCI partner Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory, is working to educate the public about the importance of chimneys used by nesting or roosting swifts and has organized citizen science efforts to document and conduct counts at roost chimneys. WBCI also is a participant in the [Aerial Insectivore Conservation and Monitoring Working Group](#), a regional effort to address population declines for this group of species coordinated by the Midwest Coordinated Bird Monitoring Partnership. WBCI's [Wisconsin Nightjar Survey](#) has been tracking populations of Eastern whip-poor-wills and common nighthawks statewide since 2008.





Direct Human-caused Sources of Bird Mortality

While habitat loss is the leading cause of bird population declines, the 2014 SOTB highlights recent research estimating that billions of birds are directly killed in the U.S. each year by various human-caused actions including predation by feral or free-roaming cats, collisions with buildings, cars, and other structures, and agricultural chemicals. Individual citizens, businesses, homeowners, and land managers can all help save millions of birds by reducing or eliminating these direct sources of mortality.

The innovative [Bird City Wisconsin](#) program is challenging communities all across the state to become more bird-friendly by addressing these sorts of problems, recognizing them for their achievements, and providing resources to help them succeed. The WBCI Issues Committee has also developed a [series of white papers](#) to assist professionals and private citizens in understanding and addressing these mortality factors.



Conclusion

What does this mean for birds and the millions of Wisconsinites who appreciate them? The report illustrates the importance of research and monitoring that documents bird population trends and their causes, and the need to creatively develop and implement strategies that support bird populations in need of our help. Supporting such research and management, and finding ways to implement sound bird conservation practices at all scales –

from national forests and refuges to our own backyards – should be a priority for all of us. **For more information or to get involved, please visit the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative at www.wisconsinbirds.org.**

Image Credits

Page 1: Habitat Indicator Change graph, 2014 State of the Birds Report.

Page 2: Bobolink, photo by Jack Bartholmai; Wetland, photo by WDNR.

Page 3: Forest, photo by Robert Howe; Common nighthawk with chicks, photo by Pam Hunt.

Page 4: Bird mortality graphic, Smithsonian Institute; Bird City sign, photo by Carl Schwartz; Marshbird monitoring, photo by Tim Oksiuta.