

Urban Bird Treaty Cities Address Dramatic Avian Population Decline

THE city of Nashville has signed up for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Urban Bird Treaty program—joining 30 other municipalities committed to conserving migratory birds and their habitat. The UBT, which was launched over two decades ago in New Orleans and now includes large and small cities across the country, is based on the premise that urban areas can provide sanctuaries for nesting, overwintering, and migrating birds. In addition to protecting and enhancing urban habitat, the program reduces bird hazards and fosters community engagement. It also includes a matching-grant component that supports community-based conservation projects in amounts up to \$50,000.

Cities participating in the program are addressing the dramatic decline in bird populations. A 2019 study published in *Science* estimates a net loss of 3 billion birds over the last 48 years in North America alone—a drop to only 29 percent of the 1970 population. The precipitous loss is due in large part to development-driven habitat loss and degradation.

Urban hazards are also responsible. According to FWS, key hazards include building glass, as well as the lighting that attracts birds to the buildings. Free-roaming cats are also a leading cause of annual bird deaths. In addition, urban pesticide use can poison birds and limit their food supply, in part by reducing insect populations. Similarly, invasive plants can edge out native plant habitat that provides shelter and food, including indirectly by supporting insect populations. Trash represents another hazard, as birds ingest or become entangled in plastic and other materials.

But UBT projects aren't "strictly for the birds" so to speak. They're intend-

ed to serve people as well. Noting that "birds contribute aesthetically, culturally, scientifically, and economically to America's communities," FWS emphasizes the benefits of bird-friendly landscapes to the health and environs of urban dwellers. Bird-watching activities, for example, are associated with increased levels of well-being and, more generally, preserved open spaces can provide opportunities for physical activity and relaxation and their attendant health and quality of life benefits. Among the myriad ecological functions that birds serve are pollinating plants, dispersing seeds, and controlling insects.

To apply for a UBT designation, cities must establish a "city team" that includes at least three organizations and submit a "bird agenda" that includes a description of the strategies, actions, and tools the city plans to undertake, including both site-based and long-term systemic changes.

In practice, the program is implemented in a variety of forms. For example, habitat conservation projects in Anchorage include installing a bird viewing platform; building a native plant garden to attract hummingbirds; implementing a bioengineering project to protect creek and lagoon banks; and adopting dog-free zones to protect nesting birds.

In Chicago, efforts to reduce building glass and light hazards include expanding the Lights Out Chicago program that encourages building owners to turn off decorative lights during the migratory season and working with the U.S. Green Building Council to distribute bird-safe design guidelines for architects, such as using bird-safe glass that is fritted, angled, or non-reflective.

But preserving habitat and removing hazards can also bring unintended consequences. UBT's newest member,



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Nashville, experienced this first-hand in 2021 when 100,000 migrating purple martins roosted in the trees in front of the symphony center for the second year in a row, causing considerable and costly damage to buildings and trees over a two-month period. The center—after working with local groups to identify options, including turning off bird-attracting lights and broadcasting competing bird calls—ultimately defaulted to cutting down many of the trees. In a *New York Times* guest essay entitled "A Flock of Beautiful Birds in a City Is a Miracle, a Disaster, and a Conundrum," Margaret Renkl observed: "This conflict is a perfect example of how complex it can be to make urban settings welcoming for wildlife, even when all invested parties are proceeding with good will."

Laurel Creech, The Nature Conservancy's Tennessee State Director, hopes that her organization and its UBT partners can help prevent situations in which providing habitat inadvertently leads to property damage or other problems. She explains: "We want to educate communities about the types of trees that may attract migrating birds, so that businesses and residents can tailor their landscaping choices and management practices."

As the UBT program recognizes, community education and engagement not only build support for protecting bird habitat and reducing urban hazards, but ultimately influence "the daily choices" individuals can make to support bird conservation.

Billions of birds die each year in the U.S. from preventable human causes