



Brunswick Wildlife Common Birds in Decline

You may know of endangered bird species, of successes enabled by the Endangered Species Act like the recovery of the Bald Eagle, and even of birds whose numbers have continued to rise to the point that, like our “golf course” Canada Geese, they are too numerous. What about the status of common birds?

A few weeks ago, I attended a National Audubon Society teleconference concerning common birds in decline. By definition, common birds are those species whose population in the lower forty-eight states still exceeds a half million.

This is a new focus. We had information of the plight of some common birds like the Bobwhite Quail; however, this new focus concentrates on ten birds that, while they are still relatively common, have experienced huge declines of over fifty percent nationally. Data was also presented by state for the five species with the largest statewide decline.

The numbers analyzed by scientists were compiled over the past forty plus years from Christmas Bird Counts sponsored by Audubon and annual Breeding Bird Surveys sponsored by the US Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Christmas Bird Counts are held nationwide with at least fifty locations in the Carolinas, including the Southport and Wilmington areas.

North Carolina's top five (with their percentage of statewide decline in parentheses) are: Bobwhite Quail (96), Loggerhead Shrike (95), Common Tern (79), Eastern Meadowlark (79), and Field Sparrow (59). The meadowlark and shrike are pictured above.

The data were scientifically adjusted for the amount of effort, given the huge increase in people participating in the counts. They were also adjusted to ensure migrants, such as Forster's Terns that overwinter in our area but breed to our north, were not double counted. The forty year's data still needs adjusting for birds that are expanding their range northward such as the White Ibis of Southport and the Wood Storks of Sunset Beach...but that adjustment will have little impact on results except for Florida.

The new focus is alarming because it represents the overall health status of our bird populations which is a proxy for the health of our natural resources, the environment, and our quality of life. The data foretell of a future where common birds may become endangered.

If you have begun to miss the sounds of birds like quail and meadowlarks, you have noticed the beginning of an impending silence. Just a few years ago, I occasionally had quail walk through my backyard or I heard one near my neighborhood. Now I have to go to a preserve like the Green Swamp to find them.

Birds are very strong and resilient. They can make dramatic comebacks; however, they cannot recover without our help from loss of habitat or habitat quality degradation, the main cause of decline in bird populations. Degradation of habitat quality includes increased predation that comes with development such as that by feral and house cats.

Bird species are categorized along a continuum from very specialized to accomplished generalists with respect to food, climate, and habitat needs...adaptations that took millions of years to evolve.

The best known specialist in Brunswick County is the Red-cockaded Woodpecker which establishes nest cavities in older, live Longleaf Pines. It became endangered because ninety-five percent of these forests in the Southeast have been cleared for agriculture or developed. Unfortunately, forests that have been harvested and re-planted will require fifty plus years before the pines are old enough to attract these woodpeckers.

Consummate generalists like gulls easily adapt to living with human changes to the environment; however, common birds of the grasslands, the forest interior, and those that nest on barrier islands cannot adapt to golf course living so their numbers are in steep decline.

This is the first part a two-part story. It presents the problem. Next week's article will present solutions, including what individuals can do.

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