

Maine Voices: Our state's actions are key to reversing trend of bird population decline

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FALMOUTH — The numbers are staggering. A [recent article](#) in the journal *Science* [documents](#) declines among 64 percent of all Eastern forest bird species – a loss of 167 million birds – and among 50 percent of all boreal forest species – a loss of 501 million birds – in North America alone. That means nearly one in four of all Eastern forest birds and one in three of all boreal forest birds that were coloring the forest with their flashy feathers and cheerful songs in 1970 are no longer with us.

There are many reasons for these declines. Some of the more persistent are habitat loss on both breeding and wintering grounds, loss or degradation of migratory stopovers, decline or contamination of insect food from overuse of pesticides, collisions with windows and other

human structures and predation from cats. Individuals can take simple steps to steward birds and habitat, and every little bit helps. Maine can do more than a little bit; in fact, we can play an outsized role in helping to stem the decline.

Our state has the largest remaining contiguous block of forest in the eastern U.S., and these forests are vital to the breeding success of millions of forest songbirds every year. We are the “baby bird factory” for the entire Atlantic Flyway. Because of that, much of northern and western Maine [has been designated](#) as a globally significant Important Bird Area by National Audubon and BirdLife International. We have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help these declining birds.

Each spring we welcome back feathered friends like the hermit thrush or blackpoll warbler returning from Central and South America to breed and raise their young in our forests. Many others travel through Maine on their way to their breeding grounds in the expansive boreal forests of Canada. Birders wait and watch to see which new species will arrive each day, and rush to try to catch a glimpse of them and hear their unique songs before they fly on. The birds themselves usually return to the same place they were raised, seeking a good place to build a nest, find food, seek shelter from predators and raise their young.

That’s why, at Maine Audubon, we have teamed up with foresters and biologists at the Maine Forest Service, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and Forest Stewards Guild to work with foresters, landowners and loggers to manage their forests “[with birds in mind](#).” The idea is simple – in addition to managing a woodland for values like water, timber and recreation, you can actually improve habitat for a wide variety of birds at the same time.

Imagine an apartment building. The more stories, the more apartments on each story, and the more people can live there. Forests are like that, too – the more vegetation in the understory, midstory and overstory, the more places there are for birds to nest and feed. Add in dead standing trees, or snags, and suddenly chickadees and woodpeckers show up. Large dead logs on the forest floor invite ruffed grouse to boom for a mate. Shrubs around a forested wetland? You might find a Canada warbler. Each different species is adapted to use a different part of the forest. But if only a few of those forest features are present, only a few birds can live there. With 96 percent of Maine’s land privately owned, landowners can play a critical role in helping birds and other wildlife.

By increasing both the vertical and horizontal structure of the forest by retaining and/or growing a variety of tree species, ages and sizes, woodland owners can provide many more places for different species and multiple pairs of that species to nest, feed and raise young.

Our Forestry for Maine Birds (maineaudubon.org/FFMB) program provides foresters, landowners and loggers with information, guidebooks and other materials they need to help create high-quality breeding habitat so these forest birds can keep making babies. Because without more babies, there will be no more birds.

