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# FAST FACTS

**January 15, 2010**

## Manitoba's Silent Spring: our disappearing birds

**A**lmost every source of data, from the volunteer-based Breeding Bird Survey to university-lead research, as well as broad-based summary documents such as the recent “State of the Birds Report” (a U.S report by many partner organizations) point to widespread declines in many bird species in North America. Declines are being documented not just in those species already known to occur in low numbers but also in widespread and “common” species such as the Barn Swallow and Common Grackle. Furthermore, there appears to be no consistent pattern to identify which species are likely to experience declines. Some guilds, such as aerial insectivores, are clearly in trouble; other suites of species that share similar habitats such as grassland specialists are also suffering heavy declines.

The “red list” in Canada grows every year. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) continues to recommend species for listing and more and more of these have passed into the various schedules of the Species at Risk Act (SARA). A few short years ago, only a handful of bird species that breed in Manitoba were listed by COSEWIC, but this is sadly no longer the case. In 2006 the Golden-winged Warbler and Rusty Blackbird gained threatened and special-concern status respectively; in 2007 the Chimney Swift, Common Nighthawk, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Red-headed Woodpecker all became threatened; in 2008 the Canada Warbler became

threatened, in 2009 the Whip-poor-will and Chestnut-collared Longspur were listed as threatened and the Horned Grebe as special concern, and there is every indication that the list will grow in 2010.

In Manitoba we have insufficient data to know how the general trends noted on a continental-scale apply in our area. While Golden-winged Warblers are faring better here than elsewhere, anecdotal evidence suggests that some species are in more trouble than their federal ranking might indicate, the best example being the Baird's Sparrow, listed provincially as endangered but not listed federally. This grassland species, along with several others, has suffered massive declines and a considerable range collapse. Although they once bred as far east as Winnipeg, Baird's Sparrows are now confined in Manitoba to a few sites near the Saskatchewan border.

Under SARA our provincial and federal governments are obligated to protect critical habitat for these species and this obligation has profound implications. This new act is already being tested with highly publicized lawsuits such as the recent Sage Grouse case, where conservation groups have argued that government has not fulfilled its obligations under the act. Foreseeing an insurmountable cumulative burden, some have begun advocating abandoning the endangered-species concept for a more holistic approach such as endangered ecosystem protection or ecosystem management.



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## FAST FACTS *continued ...*

Manitoba species on Endangered List			Manitoba species on Threatened List		
Species	Description	Year	Species	Description	Year
Red Knot*	Arctic shorebird	2007	Chestnut-collared Longspur	Prairie songbird	2009
Burrowing Owl	Grassland raptor	2006	Whip-poor-will	Aerial insectivore	2009
Ivory Gull	Arctic specialist	2006	Least Bittern	Marsh bird	2009
Piping Plover*	Prairie shorebird	2001	Canada Warbler	Boreal songbird	2008
Eskimo Curlew	Arctic shorebird	2000	Ferruginous Hawk	Prairie raptor	2008
<i>eastern</i> Loggerhead Shrike*	Prairie songbird	2000	Chimney Swift	Aerial insectivore	2008
Manitoba species on Special Concern List			Common Nighthawk	Aerial insectivore	2007
Species	Description	Year	Olive-sided Flycatcher	Aerial insectivore	2007
Horned Grebe*	Water bird	2009	Red-headed Woodpecker	Parkland omnivore	2007
Short-eared Owl	Open area raptor	2008	Ross's Gull	Arctic specialist	2007
Peregrine Falcon*	Open area raptor	2007	Golden-winged Warbler	Parkland songbird	2006
Rusty Blackbird	Boreal songbird	2006	<i>western</i> Loggerhead Shrike*	Prairie songbird	2006
Yellow Rail	Marsh bird	2001	Sprague's Pipit	Prairie songbird	2001

This table shows only federally listed species that occur in Manitoba. Year refers to the date of the latest COSWEIC assessment where a change occurred. An asterisk indicates that there is some difference in the way subspecies or populations are listed (only subspecies or populations relevant to Manitoba are given). Ivory Gull has very limited occurrence in Manitoba. Red Knot migrates through the province but does not breed in Manitoba. Eskimo Curlew once migrated through Manitoba but is presumed extinct.

The question is fast becoming whether our current socio-economic and legal systems are adequate to facilitate “sustainability”. Indeed, as a society, we have hardly even begun to comprehend what sustainability means, nor addressed the more difficult question of what other life forms we foresee living alongside us in our sustainable future and which we will allow to become extinct.

Our current economic system is driven by the principle of economic growth but anyone who studies natural systems will recognize that growth is never sustainable indefinitely and that finite resources impose controls. Ultimately, if we are truly to embrace the concept of sustainability, our entire economic model will require a radical rethinking. We will need to reconsider how we measure resource extraction and consumption and how we monitor our own activities as a species that is part of a larger, interdependent community. We will need to find ways to ensure that the fundamental processes that drive ecosystems and keep landscapes “whole” (rather than a matrix of fragmented habitat patches) remain intact.

Even if we are not yet close enough to the cliff edge to muster the energy necessary for immediate

radical change, there is an increasing number of citizens engaged in grassroots movements to monitor the ecosystems that sustain us and, by so doing, to prepare society to attend to changes in natural systems before they become irreversible. In our province, one such citizen-science effort, the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas, will soon begin to address the need for more comprehensive baseline data on the distribution and abundance of Manitoba birds. This activity will not stem the tide of declines in bird populations; however, engaging and empowering citizens to monitor the environment in their own backyard may ultimately be the only way to inspire governments to begin to take the radical steps necessary to protect the planet and the family of life into which we were born.

If you would like to participate in the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas, contact Dr. Artuso.

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