

Warming sends birds flocking farther north

But experts warn trend endangers habitats

By RICHARD DEGENER Staff Writer, 609-463-6711

(Published: Sunday, February 15, 2009

)

CAPE MAY POINT - It used to be a rare winter sight to see a black vulture feeding on roadkill on the shoulder of Sunset Boulevard. Now, it's pretty common.

A study released this week by the National Audubon Society that looked at 40 years of winter bird counts, and weather data during the period, blames it on global warming. The coastal winter range of the black vulture used to pretty much stop in Delaware. The study said it has moved 51.9 miles to the north over the past four decades.

"We never used to see them in the spring or the winter. Twenty five years ago you couldn't buy one in South Jersey in the winter or spring," said Paul Kerlinger, an expert on bird migrations who also has studied the economic impact of birding in Cape May County.

It might seem like a good thing in an area where bird watching brings millions of dollars per year to the local economy. The Cape May area is getting more bird species than it is losing. The study found a more than 3-1 ratio in species gained to species lost in New Jersey as birds winter farther north.

The experts, however, are adding one very big caution: Warming could cause more avian problems in the long run.

Experts believe the warming trend is melting polar ice caps and causing thermal expansion of seawater. At the same time, land is subsiding south of the last glacial movement, which includes southern New Jersey.

Many scientists, including those who worked on the study, say man is adding to the warming trend by emitting greenhouse gases.

They warn that higher sea levels could devastate beach-nesting birds such as piping plovers, least terns and black skimmers. The water also could inundate the marshes between the barrier islands and the Garden State Parkway, which would impact waterfowl such as herons, egrets and ducks.

"Short term, we're in the middle so we probably won't be hurt. It could be helpful in some ways. But long term, sea levels rise, and if we lose the marshes and a lot of beaches, that will change. With no shorebirds or waterfowl, the people aren't going to come as much," Kerlinger said.

In a natural system, the beaches and marshes would simply move farther inland. Kerlinger expects that won't happen.

"People won't allow that. They'll put up berms and walls," Kerlinger said.

National Audubon Society Bird Conservation Director Greg Butcher, who was the leader in analyzing the data, said sea level is the key to what happens in Cape May County. The study showed adverse effects here so far for five species, including the pine siskin, rough-legged hawk, American tree sparrow, white-winged scoter and horned grebe. The beaches and marshes, though, are still intact.

"We expect Cape May to be heavily affected by sea level rise. Unless we give the wetlands a way to migrate inland, we expect to lose a lot of saltmarsh and beach birds," Butcher said.

A bigger question could be whether the changes shut down Cape May as a migratory corridor. The geography of the peninsula funnels birds into a small area, especially juveniles, and when they hit the Delaware Bay they often come down to rest and forage. Many fly along the bayshore confused about what to do next.

This funneling also works with butterflies, dragonflies and bats. It creates great bird-watching on the ground of many different species. Of more than 350 bird species in New Jersey, all but about 20 of them are migratory, some from places as far away as South America and the Arctic.

Kerlinger said the movement of birds would continue, but if the peninsula is underwater, the funneling effect and the concentrations could be lost. Juvenile hawks that now funnel down the coast would still go south, but may not be seen in any great numbers.

"Without the bottleneck at the end, it won't be as much fun to watch. It's going to be a huge difference," Kerlinger said.

Peter Dunne, director of the New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Bird Observatory, said changes are not being noticed just in migration ranges.

"Courtship and breeding is increasingly earlier. Egg-laying is earlier. What's remarkable about this is the change seems to be occurring so quickly. Our assumption is it takes hundreds of years. No, it doesn't," Dunne said.

The study found 177 of the 305 species that winter on the continent have shifted their range significantly to the north since 1968.

"People think global warming is far into the future. The likely impacts of climate change are being seen right now," National Audubon Society President John Flicker said.

The trend led to increases here of at least 18 species, including the black vulture. Some birds that used to winter south of the United States are now wintering in the U.S. The trend could eventually bring more of these birds to New Jersey.

There is more concern about the impact on some unique habitats such as forest birds in Hawaii, species that use the tundra in Alaska and birds in any coastal area that gets submerged. There also is worry that climate change could affect the habitat, including the plants, animals and insects the birds depend on for food.

The society is calling for an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050 by using cuts in fossil fuels and increases in clean alternative energy.