

Leaving the nest

Study finds large numbers of bird populations cut in half since 1967

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WASHINGTON - The populations of nearly two dozen common American birds - the fence-sitting meadowlark, the frenetic Rufous hummingbird and the whippoorwill with its haunting call - are half what they were 40 years ago, a new analysis found.

The northern bobwhite and its familiar wake-up whistle once seemed to be everywhere in the East. Last Christmas, volunteer bird counters could find only three of them and only 18 Eastern meadowlarks in Massachusetts.

Twenty different common bird species - those with populations more than half a million and covering a wide range - have seen populations fall at least in half since 1967, according to a study by the National Audubon Society. The bird group compared databases for 550 species from two different bird surveys: its own Christmas bird count and the U.S. Geological Survey's breeding bird survey in June.

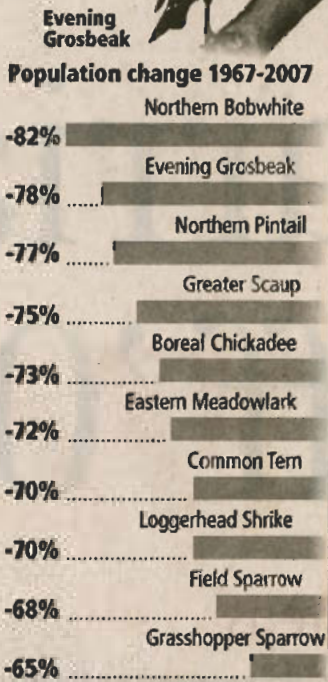
Some of the birds, such as the evening grosbeak, used to be so plentiful that people would complain about how they crowded birdfeeders and finished off 50-pound sacks of sunflower seeds in just a couple of hours. But the colorful and gregarious grosbeak's numbers have plummeted 78 percent in the past 40 years.

"It was an amazing phenomenon all through the '70s that's just disappeared. It's just a really dramatic thing because it was in people's backyards and (now) it's not in people's backyards," said study author Greg Butcher, Audubon's bird conservation director.

Many of the species in

Falling flocks

Twenty different common American bird species - numbering more than half a million - have seen their populations drop by at least half in the past 40 years.



SOURCE: National Audubon Society AP

decline depend on open grassy habitats that are disappearing because of suburban sprawl. Climate change and invasive species are to blame, too, he said. "Most of these we don't expect will go extinct," Butcher said. "We think they reflect other things that are happening in the environment that we should be worried about."

Audubon Board Chairman Carol Browner, former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator, called

the declines "a warning signal."

Compared with 1967, there are 432 million fewer of these bird species.

"Things we all think of as familiar backyard birds ... they appear in books and children's stories and suddenly some of them are way less familiar than they should be," said John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell ornithology lab, who was not part of the study.

The northern bobwhite had the biggest drop among common birds. In 1967, there were 31 million of the plump ground-loving bird. Now they number closer to 5.5 million.

"If you look in the Northeast, it's almost gone from New England and pretty much New York as well," Butcher said.

In some cases, there are still plenty of birds left, despite large surprising drop-offs. The common grackle used to be as plentiful as people in 1967, with both human and grackle populations hovering around 200 million. Now the grackle is down to 73 million and humans are up to 300 million.

But while these common birds are in decline, others are taking their place or even elbowing them aside. The wild turkey, once in deep trouble, is growing at a rate of 14 percent a year. The double-crested cormorant, pushed nearly to extinction by DDT, is growing at a rate of 8 percent a year and populations of the pesky Canada goose increase by 7 percent yearly.

Many of the birds that are disappearing are specialists, while the thriving ones are generalists that do well in urban sprawl and all kinds of environments, Butcher said. In a way it's the Wal-Mart-ization of America's skies, he said.