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FEATURED

## Saving the birds: Homeowners can help rebuild declining populations

By Laura Ruby The Northern Virginia Daily  
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A robin flies across a field at Blandy Experimental Farm in Boyce.

Rich Cooley/Daily

Bird populations are plummeting across North America, but local experts say creating a hospitable habitat for our feathered friends can be easy — no matter the size of your property.

According to a 2022 report from BirdLife International, one in eight bird species is threatened with extinction. A 2019 study from The Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University noted that 2.9 billion birds are estimated to have been lost in North America since 1970.

David Carr, director of Blandy Experimental Farm in Boyce and research professor in environmental sciences at the University of Virginia, is a longtime bird enthusiast and has had a front row seat to the decline. The good news, Carr said, is that there are many ways that Shenandoah Valley residents can help.



“I started birding in the 1970 so I’ve probably been a birder for like 40 of the 50 years covered in that [Cornell] study and I definitely have gotten the impression — just from being a birder — that we’ve seen those sorts of declines,” Carr said, adding that he has participated in annual Christmas bird counts for 44 years. “I’ve been doing the same area forever. The number of birds that we see is quite a bit lower now than it was back when we started.”

Carr said that habitat loss is “almost certainly” the biggest contributing factor to the drop in population among birds, adding that birds are losing breeding and wintering habitat. He added that agriculture intensification is another important factor in the decline.

“Agriculture land is so valuable that farmers need to extract as much out of that land as they possibly can and so farming has become much more efficient — farmers clear out hedgerows and edge habitat that used to be pretty important habitat for a lot of birds. So that kind of habitat is disappearing,” he said.

### **Climate change**

Carr noted that climate change is also having an effect, but how it is impacting overall numbers is more difficult to pin down.

“There are almost certainly going to be winners and losers with climate change,” he said.

Carr explained that as the climate becomes warmer, some Virginia bird species that are adapted to cooler climates of area mountaintops will likely move north because the local mountain plant community will change and no longer support their needs.

“As climate warms in decades to come, we’re probably going to lose that type of habitat. Species that are adapted to lower elevations will make it up to higher elevations and then species that rely on those high elevation communities will probably move farther north and out of Virginia,” he said.

Another possible climate change shift may happen in the synchrony between bird migration and the food resources that they depend upon, Carr said, noting that many migrant bird species come to the area from the tropics in the spring to feed on insects.

“That’s the biggest driver for coming up into North America is that every spring North America greens up and the insects come out. Insects, from a bird’s perspective, represent protein and fats and that’s what they want to feed their babies and so they’re taking advantage of this huge pulse of insects that happens up here every summer,” Carr said.

But, Carr said, it’s likely that the synchrony of the greening of the U.S. and the arrival of the birds will be disrupted in the future and “people are concerned about how resources, when the birds arrive, will match up to what they have historically been.”

Carr sees some evidence of that shift happening already.

For instance, migratory tree swallows are arriving at Blandy and building nests in bluebird houses earlier in the season.

“The nesting time for bluebirds has not changed, but tree swallows have advanced their nesting date by a week,” he said, noting that they are outcompeting bluebirds for bird houses because of their earlier arrival. “It’s great news for tree swallows, but maybe not for bluebirds.”

He said that rusty blackbirds, which have historically migrated from Canada and Alaska to winter in Virginia and farther south, have declined by about 90% in the last 50-plus years, representing the biggest decline of all North American birds. There is some suggestion that climate change is playing a part, he said.

“That’s a bird that I’ve always seen at Blandy. The numbers have been lower and lower and this winter, I have not seen one,” he said, adding that it was the first time he hadn’t seen the bird since he began working there in 1997.

On the other side of the scale, Carr said that there are some species that typically left Virginia for the winter and are now sticking around.



## Rebuilding the population

Carr said that homeowners can play a vital role in helping to rebuild bird populations. Noting that there is significantly more land in private ownership than in public ownership, especially in the eastern part of the county, Carr said that those with even small yards can have a big impact.

“Although parks and wildlife refuges are trying to do their best to provide wildlife habitat, the collective action of homeowners could have a big influence on bird habitat if people make choices for their yards that might favor our birds,” he said. “The single most significant thing that homeowners can do is to plant native species.”

Carr explained that native species host many more insects than non-native species, providing that vital food source for birds.

“Of course that probably means that they experience a little more damage — you’ll see holes in the leaves that you won’t with a lot of species that are popular in the horticulture trade, but those insects are feeding birds. All these birds that are coming up from the tropics every spring, they are after those insects. Their goal is to convert those insects into baby birds,” Carr said. “It benefits more than just migratory birds. Even our local, resident species need those insects and native plants are vastly superior to non-native plants in supplying those insects because our native insects have evolved with our native plants and so that’s their food source. These non-native species that are brought in for horticulture purposes look beautiful, but we don’t have the insects that are adapted to feed on them, in most cases.”

Carr said residents “almost can’t go wrong” with choosing a native species. He offered a few recommendations of plants that serve native specialties and have a nice aesthetic, giving year-round variety to yards.

Carr suggested serviceberry (also known as Juneberry or Shadberry) for providing an early fruit source for birds like cedar waxwings, Baltimore orioles, catbirds and mockingbirds.

Arrowwood viburnum is another shrub that birds love. It blooms a little later in the summer, but still ahead of the late summer and fall fruits in the area. Both plants are highly adaptable, growing well in both sun and shade environments. Carr also recommended sassafras and spicebush, both of which provide fruit that lasts into the winter, offering a fuel source for migratory birds passing through the area on their way south. American holly is nice for providing winter fruit as well as protection during roosting.

All of those plants, Carr said, are hardy and would do well in small or large yards.

Eric Beaune, owner of Woodstock Gardens, said the nursery has many of the varieties Carr mentioned, as well as dozens of others. For the second year, the retailer is participating in Throwing Shade VA, a pilot program from the Virginia Department of Forestry aimed at encouraging homeowners to purchase native plants.

Now through May 1, at participating nurseries — locally, Woodstock Gardens and Seven Bends Nursery in Strasburg — customers can receive \$25 discounts on select native trees and shrubs that are valued at \$50 or more.

“Last year’s pilot of Throwing Shade VA was a resounding success,” wrote Urban and Community Forestry Partnership Coordinator Molly O’Liddy in a press release, adding that the program has been extended to a total of 13 nurseries in the state.

Beaune said that Woodstock Gardens sold about 1,300 native plants through the program last year.

### **Birdhouses and feeders**

Carr said that birdhouses and feeders are another way of rolling out the welcome mat for birds.

Glen Harriman, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Winchester, said he recommends sources of food and water as well as birdhouses and “places for birds to hide.”

He said bluebird houses are the most popular seller, noting that the store offers sparrow-resistant versions as well.

“More often than not, new customers come in and say I want to feed the birds, what can you suggest? We go through the different types of feeders and what kind of birds they want to attract,” he said. “And we try to educate them as much as possible on properly feeding birds so it’s safe, keeping them clean and located in the right place, keeping animals out that we don’t want there — like house cats.”

Speaking of cats, Carr said that felines are another threat to bird populations.

“The evidence is mounting that cats take a huge number of birds. Keeping your cats indoors is healthy for them and it is great for our birds. I know a lot of people do not like to hear that because their cats like to go outside,” he said. “Cats definitely like being outside, but making it safer for the birds — figuring out ways to keep your cats from killing birds — is a huge help.”



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