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Their work is for the birds

Program sheds light on perils for feathered fliers

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As millions of birds migrate south along the Mississippi flyway, some will fly into a death trap amid the lights, glass, tall buildings and TV towers of cities.

But a new program in Milwaukee to monitor birds killed by flying into buildings and a recent bird kill at a TV tower near Madison have prompted birding experts to call for more awareness of collisions during migration.

In the fall, birds tend to migrate at night behind cold fronts, and bad weather forces them to land, said John Idzikowski, an ornithologist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Birds end up in the canyons of city buildings, where lights might confuse and disorient them, resulting in collisions.

"Lights increase the density of birds near the hazard. Birds are attracted to light, and we don't know why," said Daniel Klem Jr., a professor of ornithology at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa.

Artificial light is not part of a bird's natural environment, said Travis Longcore, a University of Southern California expert on night lighting effects.

As a result, many birds end up in cities and crash into windows, which they can't see. Collision is the No. 2 killer of birds, behind habitat destruction, Klem said.

"Birds don't understand window glass and can easily kill themselves when they fly into glass," said Bill Mueller, an ornithologist with the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative.

Chicago was the first U.S. city to respond to this problem and initiate a lights-out program to save birds during the migration season, which runs from mid-March to early June and from late August to late October. Mueller speculates that Chicago saves more than 10,000 migrants each year.

During migration, exterior decorative lights on buildings are turned off at 11 p.m. and left off until the following day. The Chicago Audubon Society also suggests that other lights be turned off, especially in atriums, where there are plants inside that attract birds.

"The program does a lot of the job but not the whole job," said Judy Pollock, director of bird conservation for Chicago Audubon.

Wisconsin Humane Society



Photo/[Michael Sears](#)

Michael Larson, a wildlife rehabilitator with the Wisconsin Humane Society, examines an injured Northern flicker last month. The Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee cares for birds that are injured when they crash into windows or towers.



Photo/[Michael Sears](#)

Wisconsin Humane Society intern Shelly Steckhahn holds a Yellow-bellied sapsucker as wildlife rehabilitator Michael Larson feeds it

Chicago started the program in the fall of 2000, and other participating cities include New York City and Toronto.

Last spring, a program began in Milwaukee to determine which of the city's buildings are worst for birds.

The program is carried out by volunteers known as Wisconsin Night Guardians for Songbirds, or WiNGS. They monitor buildings and collect dead and injured birds. The monitors walk 10 sections in downtown Milwaukee starting at 6:30 a.m. each day. They search the bases of many buildings, including the Milwaukee Art Museum, Kilbourn Tower, City Hall and the U.S. Bank building, the tallest building in the city at 600 feet.

This fall, the group has found 62 birds, of which 90% were dead. All of the injured birds are taken to the Wisconsin Humane Society for rehabilitation. Before releasing each bird, Humane Society officials send it for an "indoor test drive" to make sure it is physically fit.

The dead birds comprise 26 different species, including eight warblers, eight sparrows and two kinglets. However, the numbers can be misleading because the volunteers survey such a small area, said program organizer Scott Diehl, who is with the Humane Society.

Gulls start snatching up dead birds, and street cleaners sweep up the birds before they can be counted. Diehl would like security and maintenance personnel to keep an eye out for birds to catalog or transport them.

For the WiNGS program to work effectively, more volunteers are needed, said Tim Vargo of the Urban Ecology Center, who also assists with the project. In the spring, volunteers need to start going out at 4:30 a.m.

The volunteers and other birding experts also are concerned about the birds flying into TV and radio towers.

In mid-September, an estimated 400 birds were killed crashing into a 1,100-foot TV tower near Madison. The problem is greater at taller towers, which are supported with guy wires.

Bird kills at towers have been documented for at least 50 years, with the best evidence coming from a retired physician, Charles Kemper, who has found more than 100,000 birds at an Eau Claire TV tower since 1957. The original tower was only 500 feet tall. In the early 1960s, a 1,000-foot tower with guy wires was erected, and Kemper discovered the first major collision – 11,000 birds.

Towers that are 200 to 700 feet high also might have what some call a "trickle kill" effect because of the sheer number of towers, said Longcore, of USC. The result is chronic kills that over the long term might add up to more bird deaths than massive kills at tall towers.

In Milwaukee, Idzikowski said there should be more concern about the TV towers than the downtown buildings because the buildings are not that tall.

"It could be that TV towers are worse than the buildings in Milwaukee, but we really don't have enough info to say that with any certainty," Mueller said.

Part of the problem with towers is the type of lights – white and red lights are particularly bad.

"A lot of anecdotal and experimental evidence shows that we could reduce mortality by going to strobe lights on towers," Longcore said.

John Laabs, president of the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association, said it could be possible to change lights if

a worm last month. The bird has an injured beak and while healing, it can't eat without assistance. The Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee is caring for birds injured when they crash into windows or towers.

Quotable

“ Birds don't understand window glass and can easily kill themselves when they fly into glass. ”

*- Bill Mueller,
ornithologist with the
Wisconsin Bird
Conservation Initiative*

it were viable in terms of economics and regulations.

A request for dark

WiNGS sent letters to downtown buildings asking for participation in a lights-out program but hasn't received any response.

Representatives from the mayor's office and U.S. Bank said they were not familiar with Chicago's lights-out program and wanted more information before they would comment.

"It sounds like a very good program, and I don't know why we wouldn't participate," said Cecilia Gilbert of the Milwaukee Department of Public Works.

To try to reduce Milwaukee bird deaths, architects also are working on ways to make buildings more bird friendly.

A lights-out program is a "win-win situation because you save money, energy, birds, and it is good for public relations," Diehl said.

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