

Birds on the Move

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Birds on the Move

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

On an early-fall day in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, a tiny copper-colored bird zooms around a backyard garden, attracted by the nectar-filled flowers growing there. It's a Rufous Hummingbird, pausing to refuel on its annual journey south from Alaska to Mexico- a trip of almost 4,000 miles.



United States Fish and Wildlife Service
a Rufous Hummingbird

Every year billions of birds migrate north in the spring and south in the fall. For some, it's a relatively short trip. Others travel thousands of miles, sometimes flying for days without landing. Not all birds migrate, but for those that do, it's a challenging and often dangerous journey.

Migratory birds come in all shapes and sizes, from shorebirds and seabirds to raptors, songbirds, and hummingbirds. They eat different foods and live in different places. Birds migrate to take advantage of warm weather and enjoy a good supply of food to feed their families. How do they know when to travel, where to go, and how to get there? Bird migration is a fascinating story that scientists have been studying for many years.

Hope's Long Journey

One migratory bird that scientists have studied is a Whimbrel that scientists have named "Hope." Whimbrels are shorebirds that live in many parts of the world. Thanks to a tiny solar-powered transmitter attached to one of Hope's legs, scientists were able to track her migration in 2009 and 2010. On one part of her journey, from Southampton Island off the east coast of northern Canada to the island of St. Croix in the Caribbean, Hope flew 3,500 miles without stopping!



a Whimbrel

How to Welcome Migrating Birds

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

No matter where you live, birds that migrate are in your neighborhood at some point during the year. Some are just passing through, while others are there for a season or two. Different kinds of birds take different routes through North and South America each year.



To help all birds, whether they are in your neighborhood year-round, part of the year, or briefly as they migrate to another place:

- Grow native plants to provide fruit, seeds, and protein-rich insects, as well as nesting and resting places for birds.
- Make your yard or schoolyard bird-friendly with these do-it-yourself projects: provide a birdbath as a source of clean water, put up bird feeders, and place decals on the outside of windows to help prevent bird-window crashes.
- If you go to the beach, don't litter, and be careful not to disturb shorebirds that might be nesting there.
- Switch to reusable grocery bags and refillable water bottles instead of throw-away plastic ones. A lot of plastic ends up in the ocean or other bodies of water and birds mistake it for food.
- At night, close curtains and blinds so lights inside don't confuse birds that are flying by your home.
- Keep cats indoors, because cats are very good at catching and killing large numbers of birds.



This shows an illustration of a bird bath and a photo of a bird on one.

This photo shows some litter in grass.

Migration: Difficult and Dangerous, But Worth the Trip

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon society.

Migration is very hard work, but the work has big benefits, such as food-lots of it! Many birds that migrate north in spring arrive just as huge numbers of insects are hatching. It's a buggy banquet full of protein for both hungry arriving adults and the young birds soon to be hatched. Growing chicks especially need lots of insect protein to grow big and strong. Spring also brings new seeds, fruits, and nectar-filled flowers. Thanks to all this food, many migratory birds raise more young than birds that stay in warm places all year long.



This photo shows birds migrating.

Migration is also dangerous. Storms can kill birds or send them off course. Many migrating birds crash into windows and brightly lit tall buildings.

One of the biggest problems for any migrating bird is the loss of habitat. Birds need healthy habitats everywhere they spend time throughout the year. That includes the places they nest and raise their young, the places they spend the winter, and the places they stop along their migratory journeys to rest and feed. They need wild unbuilt places like woods, beaches, grasslands, and wetlands. When natural areas are replaced by roads, homes, shopping centers, farms, and other human-made structures, there is less of the healthy habitat birds need throughout the year. A healthy habitat is also a place where there are plenty of native plants- the kinds of plants that grow naturally in a particular area. Those plants provide more nutritious fruit and host many more insects than plants that are from other places. When people replace native plants with nonnative plants, the amount of the right kind of food available to birds is reduced.

Many people want to help migratory birds. In all kinds of communities, people are planting native plants that provide food and places for hummingbirds and songbirds to nest and rest. They are working to protect grasslands for the hawks that hunt there and other birds that nest there. Beaches, wetlands, and bodies of water are being cleaned and protected to provide healthy habitats for shorebirds, wading birds, and swimming birds like ducks and geese.



Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington from Portland, America (CC BY 2.0)

This photo shows people helping to clean some wetlands in 2014.

Lights Out, Please!

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

Most birds migrate at night, when temperatures are cooler, the air is calmer, and it's easier to avoid predators. Birds also use the moon and stars to navigate.

But there's a modern-day problem for night-flying birds: brightly lit buildings. Birds confused by lights can crash into windows or circle buildings until they're exhausted. Every year, more than 100 million birds die from hitting windows.

Lights Out urges cities to dim or turn off lights at night during spring and fall migration. Since 1995, Chicago has saved more than 210,000 birds' lives this way. New York City, Charlotte, North Carolina, and many other large and small cities across the U.S. are now clicking off the lights.

Will you do your part for birds by turning out lights at night?



brightly lit buildings in a city



the Chicago skyline at dusk

Climate Change and Migration

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon society.

Science has shown that climate change is affecting birds because it is changing birds' habitats, the weather conditions birds face, and the food sources available to them during migration.

A warming climate alters the life cycles of plants and insects that migrating birds depend on for food wherever they are. It stirs up more severe storms that can kill migrating birds or throw them off course. A big study by Audubon found that more than half of the bird species in the United States and Canada could be in trouble.

Thankfully, there's hope, because there's a lot we can do right now to protect the birds we love. The most important thing is to take action. When our individual actions are added together, we can make a big difference.



NASA Climate Kids

How Do Birds Find Their Way?

This text is provided courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

Migratory birds don't have navigation systems like airplane pilots do to tell them when to turn. They must use other clues to help them find their way. First, they need to know where they are and which direction is the correct way to go. This is called orientation. Next, they need to follow the correct route. This is called navigation. Scientists have learned a lot about how birds orient themselves and navigate. Here are some of the ways birds do that:

Instinct: A bird is born with built-in knowledge called instinct. Some species instinctively know where to go when they migrate.

Experience: A bird learns more about its migration route every time it migrates. Some species learn routes by traveling with their parents.

Smell: Some birds may use their sense of smell as a clue when they are getting close to their destination.

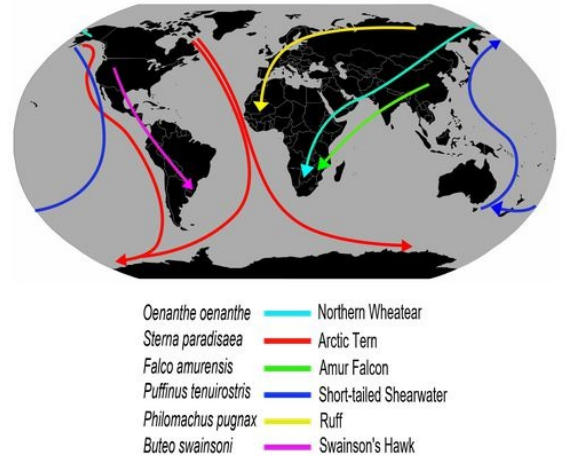
Sound: Birds may use the sound of waves on coastlines and winds flowing over mountains as guides.

Landmarks: Mountains, rivers, and other large landmarks help point the way for birds.

Sense of timing: Birds may have a built-in "program" in their brains that instinctively causes them to fly for a certain amount of time in a certain direction before changing course or stopping to rest.

The sun and stars: Many birds use the sun's position and patterns of sunlight during the day and patterns of stars at night to orient themselves.

Magnetism: Birds can sense Earth's magnetic field and use it as a compass.



This map shows the migration routes of some birds.