

Where are the birds!?

By Martin Hagne

One of the most asked questions we get here at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is “Where have my yard birds gone?” It’s a question we get often, especially during late summer and fall. If you have birds using your feeders regularly, and they seem to disappear in fall, its likely a natural cause and part of the natural cycle.

After the breeding season ends, and the adult birds are done teaching the youngsters where to find food and the weather changes with more rain and eventually cooler days. Some of the fall blooming and fruiting plants are producing, grasses are seeding, and birds tend to move back to the wild areas and away from yards for a while. Also, birds have different dietary needs during different times of the year. Often once winter sets in, at least some of the birds return to feed at feeders. Or a new set of wintering birds have moved down from the north and are now using your yard. Its an annual cycle.

Of course, there can be additional reasons, especially if it happens during another time of year when that natural cycle isn’t present. Many birds might move out of your area if there is prolonged drought, floods, storms, exceptional heat and cold waves, or a similar unusual weather condition. They may shift out of the entire region if its severe. The sever winter freezes we had a few years ago hit our bird populations very hard, and they are still bouncing back, if they never will reach pre-freeze numbers.

At times it could be due to a predator. Maybe a hawk, or a cat has moved into the area. If it’s a hawk, it’s probably just a temporary thing, or maybe for a few minutes here and there. If it’s a cat it could go on for a long time, until the cat moves on or is removed.

Changes in the “neighborhood” can also cause birds to move on. If areas around that had trees or were more natural have been cleared, new subdivisions with less cover have been built, or some other change in the landscape around you, can have big effects on birds that were coming to your yard.

Of course, the overall decline of birds has been ongoing. Year after year bird populations have been going down. As years have gone by, that decrease seems to be speeding up. Bird numbers do fluctuate for natural reasons, and that is most likely the explanation for changes you see in your yard from month to month. But it’s also true that many populations of bird species have been declining gradually but consistently for many years. In September 2019, a comprehensive study of 529 bird species in the U.S. and Canada found a net loss of 2.9 billion breeding birds, or 29% of the overall population, since 1970. The research was published in the journal Science by a team of researchers led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. And our common birds have suffered the greatest losses. It’s a grim picture!

As winter gets closer here you should see more bird returning to feeders and your yard. I know we are seeing just that at GCBO and in our own yards. Enjoy them, and get involved to find ways to help protect them!