

All About Birds

Why Birds Hit Windows—And How You Can Help Prevent It

May 5, 2017

For birds, glass windows are worse than invisible. By reflecting foliage or sky, they look like inviting places to fly into. And because the sheer number of windows is so great, their toll on birds is huge. Up to about 1 billion birds die from window strikes in the U.S. each year, according to a 2014 study.

The good news is that **you can greatly reduce the danger** your home's windows pose to birds with some simple remedies, according to Christine Sheppard, who directs the Bird Collisions Program of the American Bird Conservancy. The group offers extensive information on preventing collisions on its website. The Fatal Light Awareness Program also offers great information on preventing bird collisions.



What happens to birds that hit windows? Sadly, the bird often dies, even when it is only temporarily stunned and manages to fly away. Many times these birds die later from internal bleeding or bruising, especially on the brain. Daniel Klem of Muhlenberg College has researched this issue since the 1970s. He writes, “Glass is an indiscriminate killer that takes the fit as well as the unfit of a species’ population.”

The window imprint left by a Mourning Dove. Photo by Priscilla Bradley/PFW.

Why Birds Collide With Windows

There are two main types of window collisions: daytime and nighttime. In daylight, birds crash into windows because they see reflections of vegetation or see through the glass to potted plants or vegetation on the other side. At night, nocturnal migrants (including most songbirds) crash because they fly into lighted windows. Some of these nighttime collisions are due to chance, but much more often the nocturnal migrants are lured to their deaths by the lights. For reasons not entirely understood, lights divert nocturnal migrants from their original path, especially in low-ceiling or foggy conditions. In the lighted area, they mill about, sometimes colliding with one another or the lighted structure. The Fatal Light Awareness Program, based in Toronto, Canada, has much more about this problem.

There's one additional reason: birds sometimes see their reflection in a window and attack it. This happens most frequently in the spring when territoriality is high. Although it can be annoying to the homeowner, it's seldom a threat to the bird's survival. Most of the remedies suggested below for window strikes will also help solve the problem of a bird attacking its reflection.

Reflected landscapes can confuse birds and cause deadly window strikes.
Photo by Susan Spear/Cornell Lab.

How To Safeguard Your Windows For Birds

Start by identifying dangerous windows, including large picture windows, paired windows at right angles to each other, or windows with feeders outside. Go outside and look at your windows from a bird's point of view. If you see branches or sky reflected in or visible through the glass, that's what the birds will see, too. Past recommendations about safe distances for feeders outside windows are no longer thought to be valid, Sheppard says. "If you've got windows near a bird feeder, you should make them bird friendly and don't worry about how far away they are."

Try some of the following ideas to make your windows safer. To deter small birds, vertical markings on windows need to be spaced no more than 4 inches apart and horizontal markings no more than 2 inches apart across the entire window. (If hummingbirds are a problem, the spacing should be reduced to a 2-inch by 2-inch grid.) All marking techniques should be applied to the outside of the window.

- **Tempera paint or soap.** Mark the outside of the window with soap or tempera paint, which is inexpensive and long lasting. You can use either a grid pattern no more than 4 inches by 2 inches (see above), or get creative and paint patterns or artwork on your window.
- **Decals.** Put decals, stickers, sun catchers, mylar strips, masking tape, or other objects (even sticky notes) on the outside surface of the window. These are only effective when spaced very closely (see above). Note that hawk silhouettes do little to deter birds. Remember: placing just one or two window stickers on a large window is not going to prevent collisions—they must cover most of the glass with the spaces between too narrow for birds to fly through.
- **ABC BirdTape.** This long-lasting tape offers an easier way to apply the correct spacing of dots across your window. More about ABC BirdTape.
- **Acopian Bird Savers.** Also known as "zen curtains," these closely spaced ropes hang down over windows. They do the work of tape or decals but are easier to install and can be aesthetically pleasing. You can order them to fit your windows or make your own.
- **Screens.** Installing mosquito screens over your windows is very effective, as long as they are on the outside of the window and cover the entire surface.
- **Netting.** Cover the glass on the outside with netting at least 3 inches from the glass, taut enough to bounce birds off before they hit. Small-mesh netting (around 5/8" or 1.6 cm) is best, so that birds don't get their heads or bodies entangled but will bounce off unharmed. You can mount the netting on a frame, such as a storm-window frame, for easy installation and removal.
- **One-way transparent film.** Products such as Collidescape permit people on the inside to see out, but makes the window appear opaque on the outside. They can reduce the amount of light that comes in your window (this can also reduce your cooling costs), according to Sheppard.



If you're building a new home or remodeling, the following ideas can also be good alternatives:

- Install external shutters and keep them closed when you're not in the room or taking advantage of the light or view. (These can be huge energy savers, too!)
- Install external sun shades or awnings on windows, to block the reflection of sunlight. Remote controlled shades are available.
- On new construction or when putting in new windows, consider windows that have the screen on the entire outside of the glass.
- Add interior vertical blinds and keep the slats only half open.
- Avoid visual paths to sky and greenery. Bright windows on the opposite wall from your picture window may give the illusion of an open path to the other side. Closing a window shade or a door between rooms can sometimes solve this situation.

How To Help A Window Collision Victim

If you find a bird dazed from a window collision, examine it for external injuries. If the wings are both held properly, neither dangling, and the eyes seem normal, see if it can perch in a branch unassisted. If so, leave it to recover on its own.

If the bird has a noticeable injury, get it to a wildlife rehabilitator as quickly as possible. Broken bones usually need proper attention within minutes or hours to heal properly without surgery. Use this online directory to find a rehabber near you.

Meanwhile, place it in a dark container such as a shoebox, and leave it somewhere quiet, out of reach of pets and other predators, for 15 minutes. If the weather is extremely cold, you may need to take it inside, but don't keep the bird too warm. Do not try to give it food and water, and resist handling it. The darkness will calm the bird while it revives, which should occur within a few minutes unless it is seriously injured. Do not open the box indoors to check on it or it might escape into your house and be hard to get back out!

Take the box outside every 15 minutes or so and open it—if the bird flies off, that's that! If it doesn't recover in a couple of hours, take it to a wildlife rehabilitator. Remember that, technically, it is illegal to handle a migratory bird without a permit, and medically helping an injured bird requires training, so your job is just to transport the bird to a rehabilitator.

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/why-birds-hit-windows-and-how-you-can-help-prevent-it/>