

Birds Are Telling Us It's Time to Take Action on Climate

Global warming poses an existential threat to two-thirds of North American bird species—but there's still time to protect them. Audubon's new climate report says we have to act now.

Five years ago, we published our first report on how North America's birds would do during the climate crisis (spoiler: nearly half of them will not do well at all).

Since then, an onslaught of severe-weather events, years of record heat, and daily flooding from sea-level rise have reinforced our findings and convinced a majority of Americans that it's time to take action. Research by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication shows that more than 60 percent of Americans say the federal government should do more to address the problem. At this point, denying the need to act on climate change is a suicide wish for the planet, for people, and for birds.

Late last year, a prominent senator wrote: "The climate is changing and we, collectively, have a responsibility to do something about it." You might be surprised to learn that senator is the Republican leading the legislative committee that oversees environmental policy, and that he hails from the country's top coal-producing state. John Barrasso (R-WY) represents a shift in Washington, D.C., and across the nation; increasingly, we're seeing Republicans joining Democrats in the search for climate solutions. Audubon has helped accelerate that shift, and we have an opportunity to continue to drive change.

Audubon's bipartisan members have consistently told me over the past decade that while they may not agree with all of the dialogue around climate change, they can see its effects and that we have to protect birds—because that's what Audubon does. A full 89 percent of Audubon members, out of the more than 2,500 surveyed, believe that investing in renewable energy is critical to the health of the planet. Further, the young people who are going to live with the consequences of climate change are demanding action, too—and their voices should be heard.

It's time for broad and comprehensive climate legislation. America deserves nothing less, and it's up to all of us to hold our state and federal representatives accountable.

The report featured in this issue of Audubon magazine describes a true and scary look at the future birds face. *Survival by Degrees: 389 Bird Species on the Brink* builds on our previous analysis but relies on far more data, and the results are more detailed. It shows that 389 North American bird species—nearly two-thirds of those studied—are vulnerable to extinction due to climate change. That's right, extinction. We also analyzed nine climate-related hazards across the United States—threats that will affect people and birds—including increased fire risk, debilitating heat waves, heavy rains, and sea-level rise.

To learn more about how we did our analysis and dive further into the results, flip to the next story. The most important takeaway: If we take aggressive action now, we can help 76 percent of vulnerable species have a better chance of survival.

We already know what has to be done to reduce global warming, and we already have a lot of the tools and solutions necessary to do that—what we need now are more people committed to making sure those solutions are put into practice. It's crucial that we do two things: (1) protect the places that birds need now and into the future and (2) address the root causes of climate change. Both of those things require personal and political leadership.

Scientists describe the goal as net-zero carbon emissions before 2050. That means a complete halt on pouring gases into the air that trap heat and cause global warming. It is a universally recognized and

vital goal, but it is incredibly ambitious. We won't get there without a lot of innovation and without complete buy-in to switching to clean-energy sources across the country. That includes well-sited wind and solar power, something that some bird lovers find hard to accept. While I get that, species-level extinction is a far worse outcome.

There has been much discussion about the roles that individuals, organizations, governments, and corporations must play to make such a clean-energy transition possible. We're here to help. From state capitals to the U.S. Capitol, Audubon is known for its pragmatism and focus on solutions. We've already seen the crushing impact of climate change on birds—Pinyon Jays are losing their homes to drought and heat stress while Saltmarsh Sparrows could be drowned out of existence due to sea-level rise—and it's time we listen to that call.

In just the past year, advocacy by Audubon staff and volunteers helped secure renewable-energy wins in Washington State, Arkansas, New York, and South Carolina. These bills, which were all signed into law, will help expand renewable energy to more people in those states to meet ambitious targets by midcentury. New York, for example, has pledged to get 70 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. (We will play a watchdog role and keep you posted on whether this is political posturing or New York actually puts meat on those bones.) And a new South Carolina law encourages investment in solar energy by providing economic incentives and a fair return on investment for residential energy consumers who build solar on their properties.

As an Audubon member, you have an important role to play, too. Your credibility with your peers, passion for birds and justice, and commitment to making the world a better place give you the power to help create change. Check out the guide to climate action in the back of this magazine, which provides the tools and inspiration to make a meaningful impact at the personal, local, state, and national levels. Even one action can create ripple effects that are transformative.

In the meantime, Audubon will continue to bring people together to pull the big policy levers that bend the curve of greenhouse-gas pollution. We're already working on getting more renewable-energy bills passed in statehouses across the country. We're collaborating with states to install and protect bird-friendly natural buffers such as wetlands to help communities weather the effects of sea-level rise and coastal erosion. We're digging in across the West to ensure that there will be enough fresh water to go around for birds and people. And we'll be on the ground everywhere to assist landowners and land managers in supporting birds. That includes the creation of new revenue streams for trapping carbon pollution in grasslands and forests—an important part of the equation that gets us to net-zero emissions by 2050.

Every bit that you can do to help us achieve those goals is vitally important. I look forward to working with you as we all protect birds and the places they need.

Text from Audubon:

<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2019/birds-are-telling-us-its-time-take-action-climate>