

## What is killing our birds?

Extensive studies in both the US and Canada show that a great number of bird species are in significant danger of becoming very rare or extinct over the next few decades. In Canada there are at least 58 bird species on the official Federal “endangered” list. In BC more than 44% of the species of birds monitored are in serious decline and many are in danger of becoming extinct within the province. So what is the problem and what can anyone individual do about this matter, if anything? What is killing our birds?

As it seems with many issues these days, the answer is not simple.

The number one factor in loss of bird species is loss of habitat. If you don’t have somewhere to live, breed and raise your young, your future is definitely in jeopardy. But do other factors play a role?

The number two killer of birds seems to be household and feral cats – yes, good old kitty cat is really a killer! While studies in the US have shown that cats kill between 1 billion and 4 billion birds per year in the US there have not been very reliable figures for Canada. However a new study published last year concludes that cats kill between 100 million and 350 million birds in Canada each year! These numbers are so large as to be almost beyond our comprehension. I for one simply can’t imagine how big a pile would be formed by stacking 100 million birds in a heap. But I do recognize that it is far too large! The authors of this study conclude that predation by house cats is probably the largest human-related source of bird-mortality in Canada.

In contrast with cats, it was estimated (by different researchers) that collisions with buildings kill about 25 million birds per year in Canada. While small in comparison to cat kills, this is still a very large number. Most building mortality is due to collisions with houses (estimated about 90% of the total) simply because there are so many more houses than there are high rises. Collisions with vehicles are estimated to kill about 13 million birds per year in Canada and while this number is again lower than the previous two, vehicle collisions kill a disproportionately high percentage of owls. Barn owls are on the federal endangered list in Canada and are found basically only in the Okanagan Valley in Canada. The latest research suggests several hundred barn owls are killed in our valley by vehicle collisions each year.

An issue that has generated considerable publicity over the past decade is the number of birds killed by wind turbines. In fact, it appears that wind turbines are way down the list when looking at hazards to birds. Recent research concludes that in 2011 (the most recent data available) about 23,000 birds were killed by wind farms in Canada. Obviously as the number of wind farms grows, this number will become much larger but with careful siting of wind farms, avian mortality may not be a significant issue.

Agricultural pesticides are a significant factor in bird decline but there simply isn’t space to go into everything in one column.

The number one thing you can do to help is keep your cat indoors and press local governments to enact cat control bylaws. See the Nature Wise column of June 9, 2011 for more details on this.

([www.pentictonwesternnews.com/community/123559349.html](http://www.pentictonwesternnews.com/community/123559349.html)) You can also reduce the chances of birds colliding with your house windows. See [www.flap.org/residential.php](http://www.flap.org/residential.php) for all the details.

The South Okanagan Naturalists' Club next meets on February 27 at the Penticton United Church hall. The speaker is Hugh Westheuser who will present an illustrated program about the scenery and wildlife seen while sailing in the far north around Spitzbergen and Bear Island and will also focus on polar bears. The meeting starts at 7PM. Non-members are welcome.

Bob Handfield is President of the South Okanagan Naturalists' Club but the views expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of the Club.