

Cheering on the Birds

THE VAUX'S SWIFTS PASSING THROUGH Portland, Oregon, need all the support they can get right now, as do the other 200 bird species migrating through this city, and indeed most birds in the world.

The recently issued *State of the World's Birds* report, published by BirdLife International, is sobering, concluding that some 40 percent of the world's 11,000 bird species are in decline. The causes are many and varied: habitat loss, cat predation, bird-building strikes (birds often fly into windows they do not see and that may reflect outside trees, vegetation, or the sky), and, of course, climate change. While it can be difficult to motivate citizens to take action on behalf of the larger planet, birds offer the possibility that tangible steps can be taken that make a difference. And there are many things cities and city planners can do.



Portland's 2018 Catio Tour attracted more than 1,000 people angling for a look at backyard feline infrastructure, including Emmy's Escape, pictured above.

On the Catio Tour

I recently spent time in Portland capturing several of the most compelling and unique stories of that city's efforts to conserve, protect, and celebrate its bird life. One of the most unusual and yet creative initiatives pioneered there isn't directly related to planning but is intriguing nonetheless: a joint undertaking of two local groups that are often—for obvious reasons—at loggerheads. On September 9, the Audubon Society of Portland and the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon cohosted Portland's sixth annual Catio Tour.

Catios are cat patios, essentially enclosed spaces that permit the animals

to be partially outside while at the same time restricting their contact with and in turn predation of birds. The Feral Cats Coalition's Karen Kraus got the idea from an earlier tour of chicken coops in Portland. This alliance of bird lovers and cat lovers, she says, while unusual, is not so surprising. Surveys suggest that people care about both, and there is an increasing need to find creative solutions that merge agendas of wildlife conservation and humane treatment of animals.

The impact of feral and domestic cat predation on birds is undeniable and huge. A study by the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Biology Institute

estimates the number of birds killed by domestic and feral cats to be between 1.4 and 3.7 billion a year in the continental U.S. alone.

This year, there were 10 stops on the self-guided Catio Tour. I noticed a great deal of excitement on the part of tour participants during this four-hour period. The tour has been gaining in popularity every year—this year they capped registration at 1,300, with another 200 on a waiting list. (The best name given a catio this year must surely be the last stop, the Taj Meow.) Many of the tour-goers were clearly looking for inspiration and guidance about building their own catios.

The structures on display varied greatly in terms of design sophistication and cost. Many were creative extensions to the houses, always with some form of tube or walkway giving cats direct access to these enclosed outdoor areas. Catio owners on the tour were asked to estimate the costs of building their catios, and impressively many were built for just a few hundred dollars (though some did cost in the thousands). Many are small, most no larger than a garden shed, and did not require a building permit. There seems little objection to them by nearby home owners (unlike other backyard structures like accessory dwelling units) and most of the designs I saw would be considered by most as lovely improvements to the backyards.

The Portland effort has already inspired other cities to follow suit. There are now Catio Tours in Seattle; San Jose, California; Austin, Texas; and Gainesville, Florida, Kraus tells me. "It's not really about telling people what to do so much as giving them options and hopefully inspiring people so that fewer cats are free roaming," Kraus says. And it is a double win: good for cats and good for wildlife, especially birds.

There are many other ways cities can and must become more bird friendly. Bird-friendly design standards and requirements for window and facade treatments that minimize bird-building fatalities are part of the answer, as are



Crowds gather each September to watch migrating Vaux's swifts roost in the chimney of a Portland elementary school.

efforts that encourage building owners to turn off their lights during peak migration times.

Enhancing bird habitat is another part of the answer—something else Portland is doing through its impressive Backyard Habitat Certification program. It is a serious program requiring real commitments from volunteers, with site inspections and verifiable habitat thresholds. To achieve the highest level of certification, platinum, a minimum of 50 percent of the backyard must be planted with bird-friendly native plants. Bob Sallinger, conservation director for Portland Audubon, told me the program has been popular; more than 5,000 backyards have been certified in the Portland area.

The spectacle of roosting swifts

As the sun began to set near the end of the Catio Tour, we headed to the Chapman School to watch a bird spectacle that has become a Portland tradition. Every evening during the month of September, as many as 8,000 migrating Vaux's swifts stop for the night, converging and swirling in unbelievable frenzy and energy,

eventually swooping down the school chimney to roost there. Hundreds of residents laid out blankets and picnics to watch the natural spectacle. And many kids brought with them cardboard boxes (another tradition) to slide down the steep hill facing the school chimney.

It is heartening to see so many people mesmerized and seemingly under the magical spell of another species, in this case a small bird of less than an ounce in size.

“For many years, the kids would go to school in jackets and sweaters and they would keep the heat off the entire month while this was occurring,”

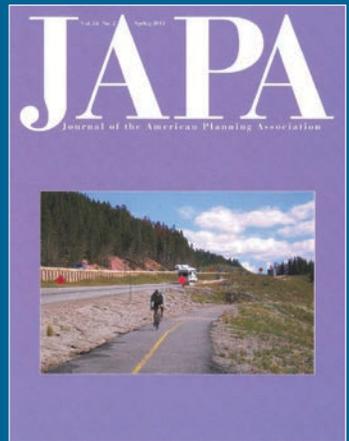
Sallinger tells me. To turn the heat on in the school would have killed the birds. Eventually, funds were found to replace the furnace and secure and save the chimney for the swifts, turning it into a permanent roost for the Vaux's swifts.

At one point during this remarkable two hours of bird convergence, a Cooper's hawk appeared on the top of the chimney, presumably looking for dinner. The crowd immediately erupted in boos, and later, as the hawk flew away, the crowd clapped.

We need to do more cheering for birds (both the swifts and hawks). Portland's work is helping to show the way. ■

—Timothy Beatley

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