What Does it Mean to be Bird-Friendly?

By Adam Betuel

The best lens to use to be the most eco-friendly is a pair of binoculars. Making your community bird-friendly is also pollinator-friendly, energy-efficient, chemical-free, and climate-forward. These are just some of the environmental movements and hashtags that are covered by making choices with birds in mind. Most people have a story about birds and are curious about them, so it’s easy to start a conversation. Birds don’t have a party, nor do they have a voice — this is neutral ground where making decisions that are bird-friendly is a good thing for everyone involved.

When we think of how our cities can be bird-friendly and how it is essential to build places where both birds and people thrive, we must start with habitat and healthy greenspaces. As we continue to grow and develop, it is often far too easy to weaken the places that our birds and other wildlife rely upon. Habitat protection, creation, and restoration are all steps that a bird-friendly city must take.

Here in Atlanta, we have an amazing and rapidly increasing network of trails. These human-focused passageways can also serve as corridors for wildlife if they are thoughtfully done. The tree canopy that Atlanta is so proud of not only cools our city, sequesters carbon, and improves our outdoor experience, but also provides shelter for nesting Great-Crested Flycatchers and a refueling station for migratory Magnolia Warblers. A strong tree ordinance and valuing our urban greenery is vital for a bird-friendly city. Just as important as habitat protection and creation is increasing the value of the available habitat. Unfortunately, too many of our yards, parks, and wild spaces are overrun with exotic and invasive plants such as Chinese Privet and English Ivy. These unwanted guests weaken our ecosystems by simplifying the structure and diversity of our forests, choking out native vegetation, failing to produce the needed amounts of insects our birds rely upon, and in many other ways. Habitat restoration, valuing native plants, and education centered on these topics are ways in which we can create and support the habitats both birds and humans need.

While it is vital to provide places where birds can flourish, a bird-friendly city must also reduce the threats birds face in an urban setting. Birds have shown us that they rely on wild places within cities but also that the built environment has dangers. Up to one billion birds perish annually in the United States from colliding with buildings. Reflective glass and transparent barriers are threats that birds are not equipped to handle, often leading to death. Luckily, products exist that allow us to have buildings that allow for great vistas and enjoyable live/work spaces without the devastating thuds of bird-building collisions.

Related to this issue of birds and buildings is lighting. Many of our winged brethren undertake an amazing journey each spring and fall between their wintering and breeding locations. As these birds migrate, many fly at night and use the stars and setting sun for guidance. Growing light pollution has been shown to disorient birds, causing them to be pulled into illuminated areas and stop in places they typically would not. Once in these constructed areas, birds are more likely to hit a window, collide with a vehicle, or encounter the many other threats that exist in these spaces. The responsible usage of lighting, buildings constructed with bird-friendly design features, green roofs, and urban planning with ecosystems as a focus are all vital for our cities to become truly welcoming and supportive of wildlife.
For a city to be bird-friendly, it must have strong legislation and ordinances regarding tree removal and replanting, water conservation, building design, and building materials, among other things. We all need to realize the value that birds bring to the environment and our lives as humans and create infrastructure that supports them. However, a bird-friendly city also needs bird-friendly residents. You might not have property that you can fill with native plants but you can purchase shade-grown coffee. In addition to putting your garage light on a timer, you can make sure your cat is fully indoors and not contributing to the staggering number of birds killed by our felines each year (approximately 2.4 billion). Don’t fog your yard with pesticides but do purchase food that is local and reduces human impacts on our environment. These are all steps that we need to consider so that collectively we can make life better for our birds.

Birds disperse seeds, pollinate, inspire us, massively contribute to our economy, and connect us to the natural world maybe more than any other type of wildlife. We need birds for us as a society to excel and they need us to preserve habitat and lessen or eliminate our modern threats. As our world, and Atlanta specifically, urbanizes and braces for a growing population, we must support our ecosystems. Bird-friendly cities can be constructed and fortunately, more and more steps are being taken every day towards this goal. Our buildings do not need to be ugly for them to be bird safe and we don’t need to forgo our comforts to coexist with our feathered friends. Take the steps you can and support the people and organizations that understand the value of our urban habitat. Now go outside and enjoy some birds!

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Resources:
Adult Workshops: https://www.atlantaaudubon.org/workshops.html
Master Birder Program: https://www.atlantaaudubon.org/master-birder-program.html
Field Trip Calendar (Free!): https://www.atlantaaudubon.org/field-trips.html
Why birds matter: https://www.atlantaaudubon.org/why-birds-matter.html