



Birds of Kansas: A Changing Scene

Michael L. Donnelly

Forty-four years ago, when I first moved to Kansas, I never saw House Finches at my feeders. Mourning Doves built their flimsy nests in our pine trees and against all odds of such rickety domestic arrangements, reproduced so prolifically that there were large flights at sundown from gravelling and watering sites near Keats to their roosts on the northern edge of Fort Riley. I saw sizeable flocks of Prairie Chickens in surrounding fields, but never saw a Wild Turkey. Often on drives on the gravel roads east of Pottawatomie State Lake #2, I had a fair chance of seeing Loggerhead Shrikes. It was a particular treat to discover that a favorite since my boyhood in Indiana, Carolina Wrens, turned up occasionally on walks in wooded areas, and even, once in a while, sang in my backyard. Red-headed Woodpeckers were abundant on the dead snags in the then-recently-flooded Tuttle Creek Reservoir and the oak groves at Pottawatomie State Lake, but I never saw a Pileated Woodpecker, or even expected to glimpse one. In the seventies, Bobwhite Quail were so abundant, and the habitat so good for them on Fort Riley Military Reservation, that I often met groups of older hunters from Georgia or Alabama, who had come all the way north to Kansas for the excellent bird hunting. It was a paradox to me, who had grown up thinking of classic quail hunting as centered in just those states.

Today, the majority of birds enjoying their repast at my backyard feeders all year long are House Finches, challenged for that status only by the Goldfinches who come in during the winter months. The mournful calls of the Mourning Doves are now rivaled more and more by the train-whistle tooting of Eurasian Collared Doves,

a species that has colonized the area only within the past decade, and seems ever-increasing in numbers. Though there was a time when I was showing foreign visitors the Konza Prairie, three times out of four I could count on jumping at least one Prairie-Chicken, these birds are becoming more and more scarce, their flocks smaller and more scattered. However, you cannot drive far in the country (or even in neighborhoods in town bordering Wildcat Creek or wooded ravines that provide wildlife major thoroughfares) without seeing large flocks of Wild Turkeys. For the past fifteen or twenty years, quail populations have plummeted, and Ft. Riley no longer seems a magnet for out-of-state bird hunters. After the severe winters of the seventies decimated their populations, Carolina Wrens have rebounded to become common residents in every dooryard, cheering the neighborhood with their implausibly echoing, insistent song, and their busy, energetic, inquisitive personalities. The dead snags in Tuttle Reservoir have mostly rotted away or boating enthusiasts have cut them down in winters with historically low waters, and Red-headed Woodpeckers are much scarcer than I remember. (Older birders tell me that their populations are dependent on the acorn harvest, and in lean years, the whole population does a short migration to more promising acorn groves in Oklahoma.) But Pileated Woodpeckers have moved into the Manhattan area, and in the last three years have been seen on every Christmas Bird Count.

Over the years, through annual population records like the Christmas Bird Count and the more recently instituted Migratory Bird Count and Breeding Bird Surveys, “citizen scientists” have

provided invaluable diachronic statistical evidence to confirm or correct personal experience and judgments based on anecdotal evidence. Temporary fluctuations in populations due to drought or poor acorn production or harsher or milder winters loom large in our immediate sense of the health of bird populations, but the truly significant data are those which represent long-term trends. For all the particular species I have mentioned in my sketches above fall into one of four categories: species that are expanding their range, species that are increasing in numbers, species that are decreasing in numbers within their former range, and species that are endangered or extirpated in their former breeding areas.

Of course, the populations of migratory waterfowl and songbirds are affected by many factors besides what happens in Kansas. But with regard to factors in Kansas and the central Great Plains, the two elements having the greatest impact on our upland bird populations are the same as those affecting migratory waterfowl and songbirds: habitat loss from drought, development, and certain agricultural practices, and the explosion of populations of nest predators. To be sure, the proliferation of *Homo sapiens* colonizing every imaginable habitat over the globe stands out as one of those statistically significant long-term trends affecting our fellow creatures in manifold ways, many of them bad. Much more controversial and unthinkable than attempts to control skunks and raccoons would be measures of population control on us. We must concern ourselves with the practicable. On the other hand, some species of birds have adapted well to our presence in the human-altered environment: American Robins, House Sparrows, European Starlings and the huge flocks of blackbirds that one sees in winter around confined animal feeding operations and grain-storage areas are prime examples. Cliff Swallows have found the construction of concrete bridges an absolute boon, while Barn Swallows, faced with fewer and fewer small farms with many outbuildings and barns, have been stressed to find substitutes. Niches in corners of mall arcades and porches of public buildings have proved a poor substitute in the face of public intolerance of walls and walkways streaked with swallow guano. Chimney Swifts once thrived in the tall chimneys that sprang up like mushrooms all over industrial areas expanding across the continent in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. The impacts of the third industrial revolution and globalization on the rust belt have surely had a damping effect on chimneys, and Chimney Swifts. The giant hollow trees that served the birds as nurseries before the Europeans came are only a distant historical memory.

When I was a boy, I often saw songbirds, particularly Robins, huddled on the lawn, seemingly paralyzed, fluttering their wings and drooping their heads, beaks open, in what looked like anting behavior, but was not; since the banning of DDT, any birds I have

observed behaving like this have been, indeed, anting. The same ban on DDT, thanks to Rachel Carson, has brought back the Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons. Since the late 1980s, Bald Eagles have begun to breed again regularly in Kansas and Peregrines have adapted to the man-made cliffs of old-fashioned concrete and steel skyscrapers in cities such as Topeka. Some species have benefitted from active human efforts to intervene positively in providing nesting habitat and protection. So, when I was a boy, I often read predictions of the disappearance of Bluebirds, out-competed for increasingly scarce hole-nesting sites by alien House Sparrows and Starlings; but the popularity of maintaining trails of Bluebird houses in country areas has made these gentle, cheerful residents a common sight again.



Painted Bunting

<http://members.boardhost.com/funlover/msg/1415275913.html>

The natural environment constitutes an enormously complex web of relationships and even with all the scientific research and technological resources at our disposal, we understand only a fraction of those interactions.



Pileated Woodpeckers

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/199143614745564938/>

The presence or disappearance of birds like the Pileated Woodpecker, a crow-sized cousin of the apparently extinct “Great God-Almighty Bird,” the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, or the Peregrine Falcon, or the Bald Eagle, or even the Bluebird registers with us easily; but the web of nature extends far beyond and beneath our superficial sensory notice. Fortunately, both birds and their food sources are more visible and easily studied than, say, nematodes or the root hairs of rye plants. But obscure facts and figures about the latter do not merely stun the imagination; they suggest the manifold details of structures and relationships in nature that we are only beginning to understand.¹ These miniscule worms and prairie forbs and grasses comprise essential elements in the great chain of beings that ultimately sustains our grassland birds.

Dashing in and destroying a habitat concerning which we have only the faintest outline of an understanding and appreciation amounts to a towering imprudence, in the case of a Kansas prairie no less than a rainforest in Borneo or Brazil. We do not even

¹In his book, *Konza Prairie: A Tallgrass Natural History* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1987), p. 202-3, O. J. Reichman points out that “on Konza [K-State Research Prairie], nematode densities reach astounding levels—as many as 500,000 per square foot in the upper 8 inches of soil during their peak abundances . . . (p. 151). Reichman also notes that “a single rye plant was found to have 14 billion root hairs, with a total surface area of 4,000 square feet (370 square meters; the size of two large homes). The primary roots had a total surface area of 2,500 square feet, yielding a total surface area 130 times that of the aboveground stems and leaves” (p. 148).

understand why quail populations have plummeted in recent years, and only in the last couple, begun to feebly rebound in some areas. Habitat destruction? The habitat on the Fort Riley Military Reservation has been substantially unaltered by the usual means over the past forty years, yet the quail have faded away there no less than on neighboring agricultural areas. What accounts for the phenomenal success in naturalizing Wild Turkeys in Kansas habitats? Neither the El Paso subspecies nor the Eastern Wild Turkey are able to make a success here, but an interbred population has been spectacularly prolific.

Why have House Finches and Eurasian Collared Doves succeeded in expanding their ranges and colonizing new areas so effectively? Is the recent presence of Pileated Woodpeckers the result of gigantic climatic shifts, rising global temperatures, the colonization of formerly grassland areas in Kansas by Eastern deciduous forests, or some other causes to which we are as yet blind?²

There is much that we do not yet understand about the dynamics of bird populations in Kansas, and many things that are perhaps beyond our control. After all, even before the coming of the Anthropocene, species appeared and fell by the wayside in accordance with great natural change. But even some of the most powerful forces acting today, like climate change, owe too much to human activity. Perhaps, with better understanding and greater human effort, the worst consequences can be retarded or even arrested in time. And certainly the unreflecting destruction of habitat, the result of indifference and greed, can be combatted by the dissemination of knowledge, however imperfect and partial at this point, and by prudent moderation in undertaking the irreversible alteration of habitats and ecological systems we only partly understand. The world might be best served by our taking the time to reflect on and evaluate, and encouraging our neighbors and our children to reflect on and evaluate, the kinds of changes we have seen, some of which I have outlined here, by trying to imagine vividly a world without Bluebirds or Bald Eagles or Sandhill Cranes or Painted Buntings, a much-diminished, less vivid, less vital world. And it would be a world much less accommodating to us. For as Bridget Stutchbury says, concluding her chapter, "Canaries in the Mine" in her 2007 book, *Silence of the Songbirds*:³

Our songbirds are disappearing, and . . . our natural world will be shaken to the core if their numbers drop so far that they can no longer play their traditional and crucial ecological roles in our natural communities. Birds have been such an important part of the world around us for so long that they are irreplaceable. Plants depend on them to pollinate flowers and to carry their seeds and fruits away from the parent plant. Plants are also counting on birds to keep leaf- and seed-eating insects under control (though the insects would be perfectly happy to see the birds disappear). For tens of thousands of years insects have been falling prey to billions of hungry mouths as the birds move north and gorge themselves each spring and summer. The world around us is already in a very fragile state, barely hanging on by a thread as we continue to cut forests and plow under grasslands, pour insecticides on the land, and expand our cities to accommodate the millions of people that join our world every year. We cannot afford to lose our birds; they are part of the complex web of life that



sustains life on our planet. (pp. 32-33)

Clearly it is imperative that we resolve to do whatever we can to forestall the day when that imagined birdless world becomes a reality for Kansas.

About the contributor: Michael L. Donnelly is retiring as an Associate Professor of English at Kansas State University. A one-time Secretary for the Kansas Wildlife Federation, he participates regularly in the Christmas Count and Migratory Bird Counts with the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, has served since 2014 as a Trustee of AOK and is editor-in-chief for this edition of *Prairie Wings*.

2. Breeding Bird Survey statistics supplied by John Schukman confirm my anecdotal experience with the species mentioned: House Finches have seen a 15.7% increase in numbers 1966-2013, Pileated Woodpeckers in that period a 13.3% increase, Wild Turkeys a 13.4% increase, and Eurasian Collared Doves an increase of a whopping 44%. Carolina Wrens have shown an increase of 5% over the period, but with dramatic fluctuations, peaking in the late nineties and plummeting in 2000-2001, then peaking again in 2007-8 but dropping to the lows of 2000-2001 in 2009-10 before rebounding somewhat since; meanwhile Mourning Doves show many population fluctuations with a slight overall decrease, Greater Prairie-Chickens have decreased steadily in the eastern tallgrass prairie region to an overall 3.3% drop in populations, Bob-whites show a 2.3% decrease in Kansas, 4% range-wide; Red-headed Woodpeckers have declined steadily since a peak in the late seventies, down now .95%, while Loggerhead Shrikes have suffered a steady decline of 5.6% overall, with only minor blips through the mid-nineties countering the consistent downward spiral.

3. New York: Walker and Company, 2007.