DEATH TRAPS

Birds and Urban Mortality

By Christine Philip

As a Chicago birder, I am surprised less and less often by the unusual places I see birds. Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the potted hawthorne trees in front of my office on north Rush Street, a Gray-cheeked Thrush in a hedge no more than 8 inches wide in front of a hotel on busy Chicago Avenue, Connecticut Warblers stalking insects at the park surrounding the old Water Tower on Michigan Avenue, a House Wren going in and out of an open window of the Northwestern University Law Library, eating spiders around the window sill - these are common daytime feeding sites for migrating birds.

Birds migrating along Chicago's lakefront are forced to find food wherever they can. The phenomenon of a lakefront migration can be great for birders; birds are concentrated in a narrow band, with limited habitat available, making viewing much easier than in a wooded or grassland habitat where acreage is plentiful.

The birds I see alive around my office are the lucky ones. They've managed to survive (at least temporarily) among concrete canyons and acres of vertical hazards. The city of Chicago is frequently a lethal trap for migrating birds.

Urban mortality results from a dizzying array of sources, but Chicago's most common bird killers are its tall buildings, clad in reflective glass and generally brightly lit at night.

Conditions vary during each migration and a coordinated census of birds killed flying into buildings across Chicago and its metropolitan region hasn't been attempted, but rough extrapolation from fatality numbers at sites where specimens have been regularly collected for years suggests that hundreds of thousands of birds die every year in northeastern Illinois as a result of collisions with man-made structures.

Chicago's geographic location, roughly at the southern end of Lake Michigan, has attracted birds for thousands of years. Extensive marshes, grasslands, and wooded ravines provided cover and food for migrants on the north and southbound journeys during the pre-settlement era.

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Despite drastic alterations of Chicago's habitat during the last 150 years, passerine migration paths still tend to lead birds straight through Chicago and up and down the western side of Lake Michigan.

"Birds just cannot learn how to deal with tall buildings," said Dr. William Beecher, formerly director of the Chicago Academy of Sciences. "We've only had tall buildings for the last 100 years, which is just not enough time for bird evolution to change species' instincts," he said. "Big cities are killing birds. If birds even make it to Chicago, past all the other hazards they have to encounter on the way from neo-tropical wintering grounds, they stand a good chance of not making it out of the city at all."

When the John Hancock Center was completed in 1969, the building's management kept the structure brightly lit at night. On overcast nights during migration, birds seemed to head for the building like a magnet, said Beecher. "When the sky is overcast and birds stop orienting their flight by the stars, they will always head for the brightest light they see. In the case of Chicago in the 1970s, that was the Hancock building."

Beecher tried to persuade the Hancock's managers to turn off the lights at night during migration. He and a reporter from the Chicago Tribune stood below the Hancock on an overcast night years ago and "watched the birds hit the building in the thousands. We two alone weren't enough to convince the Hancock building's owners to dim the lights."

It wasn't until Beecher identified and tagged the 1,000 mortalities he collected from the Hancock after a single cloudy night, lined them up one after another in the parking lot of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, and invited all the area's radio and

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