A Single Night Of Bird Collisions In Chicago Points To The Need For Window Safety

On the night of Oct. 4, 2021, a massive wave of bird migration swept through Chicago. Nearly 1,000 birds crashed into the city's buildings and lay dazed or dead on the ground. Nearly seven hundred died. It doesn't have to be so: science shows darkened windows can make a big difference in saving birds.

By Susan Cosner

April 1, 2024

Share
Bookmark this article

From the Spring 2024 issue of Living Bird magazine. Subscribe now.

Chicago experienced a wind cameo in 2021 on September 3, September 4, September 5, and September 6. Nothing to speak of, but enough to make birds wary of the city. Lurking daytime temperatures on September 7 and 8 were in the 70s, but the night of the 8th was cooler, with temperatures in the 50s. Birds felt the change in the wind, in more northern climes, waiting for the winds to shift.

On the night of September 8, a cold front moved through the Great Lakes region of the Midwest, according to NOAA's Climate.gov. Meteorologists at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Colorado State University, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst ran weather radar and meteorological data to track and forecast bird movement.

Then on the night of Oct. 4, the winds changed course, blowing from the north-northwest. Birds felt the change and began migrating in great numbers. Meteorologists at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, Colorado, and Massachusetts, saw the early morning hours, Daylight Saving Time, as Prime Time for bird collisions. Scientists in the Flying Lessons of Birds Project, studying the amazing migration spectacle I've seen, were Michael Walter, an ornithology PhD student at the University of Massachusetts, and Kyle Horton.

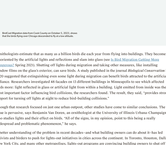
On her eBird checklist, Walter estimated rates in excess of 5,000 birds per minute. with 30 species observed in 1 hour. Horton's checklist, with 1,000 birds per minute, noted a "tremendous number of birds." Horton also wrote in the checklist comments, "It will be long time until I see something like this again."

Unfortunately, the conditions also resulted in tragedy as thousands of birds crashed into buildings during the night. Chicago's Field Museum collected 1,000 dazed and dead birds, including 700 dead birds, the second-highest, perhaps tuning only a nationwide reflection in the press—hitting the windows without even knowing they were there.

The annual weather "cameo" wind we think was a holiday of Monarchs, Swainson's Thrushes, Blackpoll Warblers, and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a majestic group of volunteers who walk around the Field Museum every morning, collecting the dead and dazed birds that crash into the city's structures. A second day-migration season, Prime-time before dawn on Oct. 4, was downcast, and marked by dazed and confused birds. There were also a few other volunteers found non-dazedness. They usually find close to 100 birds. On Oct. 4, they found 700 dead birds and 300 dazed birds, the second-highest count in the Field Museum's collection.

The carnage was worst at McCormick Place, Chicago's convention center located on Lake Michigan shoreline. A 1.5-million-square-foot glass building built in 1960, McCormick Place hosts events throughout the year, like The Chicago Auto Show and this year's Democratic National Convention. On that October night, workers within the convention center disassembled the setup for one conference and prepared for a health and fitness expo. By morning, nearly 1,000 birds—including more than 700 dazed and dead birds—had crashed into the building's windows. Workers swept up the carcasses, sometimes—but dazed birds, having settled with the glass windows, flew unknown distances.

Prince says the tragic event that night "highlights the ongoing tragedy of tens of thousands of bird building collisions that occur every year in the Chicago area."



The REDWING Image, captured 10:00 p.m. on October 3, 2021, displays the weather conditions that prompted the birds to fly the night of October 4. Light and reflectivity are represented in red and green, respectively. Credit: Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Colorado State University

Windows drifting toward Navy Pier (right of Chicago's A.C. 2021). Photo by Susan Cosner, Chicago Audubon Bird Conservation Director

Michael Magnuson dazed bird Cook County on October 5, 2021. Since then, Magnuson has found 1,000 dead birds in Cook County, Illinois. Photo by Michael Magnuson

MORE FROM LIVING BIRD

Living Bird Spring 2024—Latest Issue Contents

Living Bird Magazine—Latest Issue

Living Bird Magazine Archives

A dazed dark-eyed Junco, for instance, can instead found fallen or perched on a building ledge. Photo by Michael Magnuson

Artwork: Susan Cosner

Ornithologists estimate that as many as a billion birds die each year from flying into buildings. They become disoriented by the artificial lights and reflections and slam into glass in a Bird Migration Collide Many Windows. Birds that survive the night of the collisions are dazed and confused, and they need help.

Chicago was one of the first cities to establish a bird-safe ordinance, launching its effort in 1999. Participants in the program, which now includes 30 buildings, have reduced their lights at night by 60 percent. The city's bird-safe ordinance is one of the most effective laws of its kind, and it has been a model for other cities. Chicago's bird-safe ordinance is one of the most effective laws of its kind, and it has been a model for other cities.

Lights and reflections are particularly important in Chicago. There, millions of birds migrating through the heart of the country funnel through the city's lakefront. Lights and reflections in the city confuse the birds. Lights and reflections in the city confuse the birds. Lights and reflections in the city confuse the birds

© 2024 Cornell University

Get Living Bird Subscribe Now