

Millions of Missing Birds, Vanishing in Plain Sight

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG

Last week, the Audubon Society released a new report describing the sharp and startling population decline of some of the most familiar and common birds in America: several kinds of sparrows, the Northern bobwhite, the Eastern meadowlark, the common grackle and the common tern. The average decline of the 20 species in the Audubon Society's report is 68 percent.

Forty years ago, there were an estimated 31 million bobwhites. Now there are 5.5 million. Compared to the hundred-some condors presently in the wild, 5.5 million bobwhites sounds like a lot of birds. But what matters is the 25.5 million missing and the troubles that brought them down - and are all too likely to bring down the rest of them, too. So this is not extinction, but it is how things look before extinction happens.

The word "extinct" somehow brings to mind the birds that seem like special cases to us, the dodo or the great auk or the passenger pigeon. Most people would never have had a chance to see dodos and great auks on their remote islands before they were decimated in the 17th and 19th centuries. What is hard to remember about passenger pigeons isn't merely their once enormous numbers. It's the enormous numbers of humans to whom their comings and goings were a common sight and who supposed, erroneously, that such unending clouds of birds were indestructible. We recognize the extraordinary distinctness of the passenger pigeon now because we know its fate, killed off largely by humans. But we have moralized it thoroughly without ever really taking it to heart.

The question is whether we will see the distinctness of the field sparrow - its number is down from 18 million 40 years ago to 5.8 million - only when the last pair is being kept alive in a zoo somewhere. We love to finally care when the death watch is on. It makes us feel so very human.

Like you, I've been reading dire reports of declining species for many years now. They have the value of causing us to pay attention to species in trouble, and the sad fact is that the only species likely to endure are the ones we humans manage to pay attention to. There was a time when it was better, if you were a nonhuman species, to be ignored by humans because we trapped, shot or otherwise exploited all of the ones that got our attention. But in the past 40 years, we have killed all those millions of birds or, let us say, unintentionally caused a dramatic population loss, simply by going about business as usual.

Agriculture has intensified. So has development. Open space has been sharply reduced. We have simply pursued our livelihoods. We knew it was inimical to wolves and mountain lions. But we somehow trusted that all the innocent little birds were here to stay. What they actually need to survive, it turns out, is a landscape that is less intensely human.

The Audubon Society portrait of common bird species in decline is really a report on who humans are. Let me offer a proposition about *Homo sapiens*. We are the only species on earth capable of an ethical awareness of other species and, thus, the only species capable of happily ignoring that awareness. So far, our economic interests have proved to be completely incompatible with all but a very few forms of life. It's not that we believe that other species don't matter. It's that, historically speaking, it hasn't been worth believing one way or another. I don't suppose that most Americans would actively kill a whippoorwill if they had the chance. Yet in the past 40 years its number has dropped by 1.6 million.

In our everyday economic behavior, we seem determined to discover whether we can live alone on earth. E.O. Wilson has argued eloquently and persuasively that we cannot, that who we are depends as much on the richness and diversity of the biological life around us as it does on any inherent quality in our genes. Environmentalists of every stripe argue that we must somehow begin to correlate our economic behavior - by which I mean every aspect of it: production, consumption, habitation - with the welfare of other species.

This is the premise of sustainability. But the very foundation of our economic interests is self-interest, and in the survival of other species we see way too little self to care.

The trouble with humans is that even the smallest changes in our behavior require an epiphany. And yet compared to the fixity of other species, the narrowness of their habitats, the strictness of their diets, the precision of the niches they occupy, we are flexibility itself.

We look around us, expecting the rest of the world's occupants to adapt to the changes that we have caused, when, in fact, we have the right to expect adaptation only from ourselves.