

GREENE COUNTY, NEW YORK
EDITION



Produced by BD Collier
and
The Society for a
Re-Natural Environment

Bird Shift: The Anthropogenic Ornithology of North America is a series of projects that look at various ways humans have affected populations and behaviors of North American birds since European colonization. Through our direct and indirect actions, the very definition of the phrase “North American Birds” is changing.

Factors including human-caused climate change are predicted to have a huge impact on bird populations in the coming decades. The U.S. government publication, “The State of the Birds 2010 Report on Climate Change,” states:

Birds in every terrestrial and aquatic habitat will be affected by climate change, although individual species in each habitat are likely to respond differently.

Forecasts of bird extinction rates depend on the potential resilience of ecosystems, and vary from 5 per cent to over 70 per cent, based on current emission and warming trajectories.

These predictions are troubling, and we will certainly mourn the loss of some species. Alongside losses new things will come as bird ranges expand into new territory, due to the increase of human-transformed habitats, climate change, newly introduced species and other factors. These changes may even result in an overall increase in local bird diversity in some areas.

The central idea I’ve taken away from my investigations is how intimately connected we are to birds. Our daily decisions about where we live, what we eat, and how we travel affect them more

than we tend to realize. Yet it's not hard to see how they are adapting to our influential presence when we take some time to look around.

In this region, the single biggest impact on bird populations was from European settlers clearing the great eastern forest. A new and different forest is growing to replace the one we lost. The types and numbers of birds inhabiting this new forest will certainly continue to change as new impacts from shifting human populations continue.

The following quote sums up our European-born relationship with the natural world, especially in North America, quite well:

“Man is an inveterate and incorrigible meddler, never content to leave anything as he finds it, always seeking to alter and – as he sees it – to improve.” -*Christopher Lever from **They Dined on Eland: The Story of Acclimatization Societies***

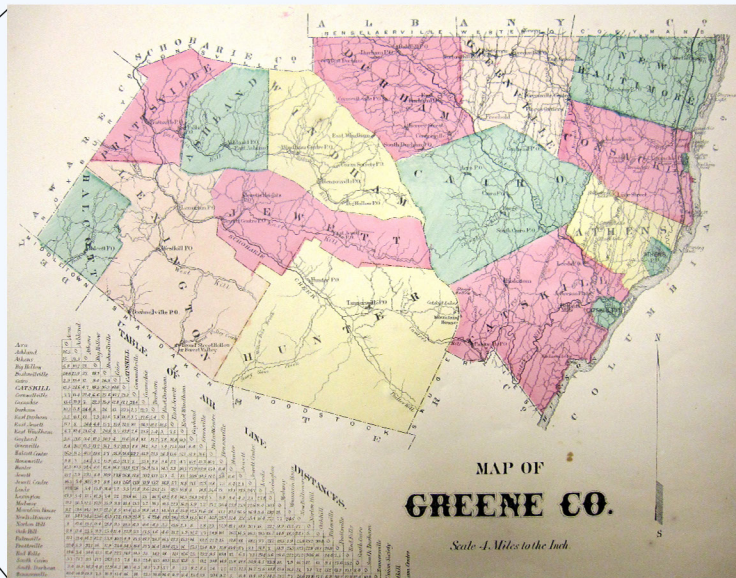
*-BD Collier, Founder and President of
The Society for a Re-Natural Environment*

The following pages describe birds whose populations have clearly been impacted by humans since European colonization.



Bird Shift: The Anthropogenic Ornithology of North America

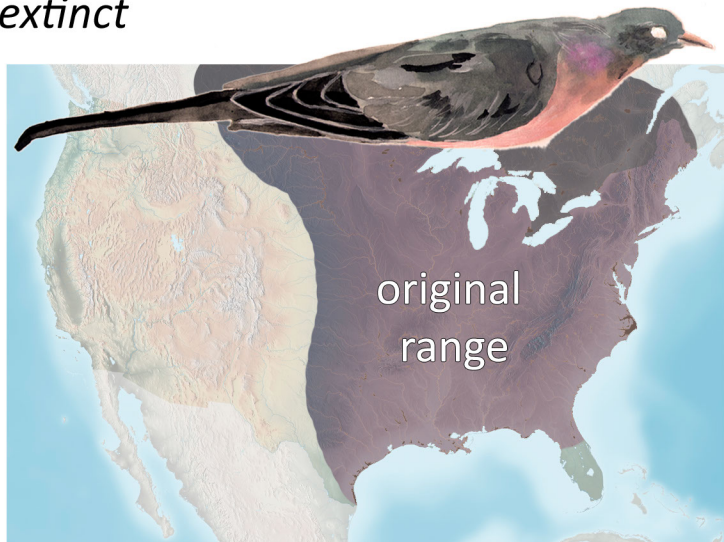
Birds of Greene County, New York



This version of Bird Shift is focused on several species of birds found, or once found, in Greene County, NY that have been directly impacted by humans. This booklet is designed to accompany a sculptural installation in the Cornell Cooperative Sluisaw Research Forest. The installation suggests what it might have been like to encounter two extinct bird species that were once common here.

Passenger pigeon

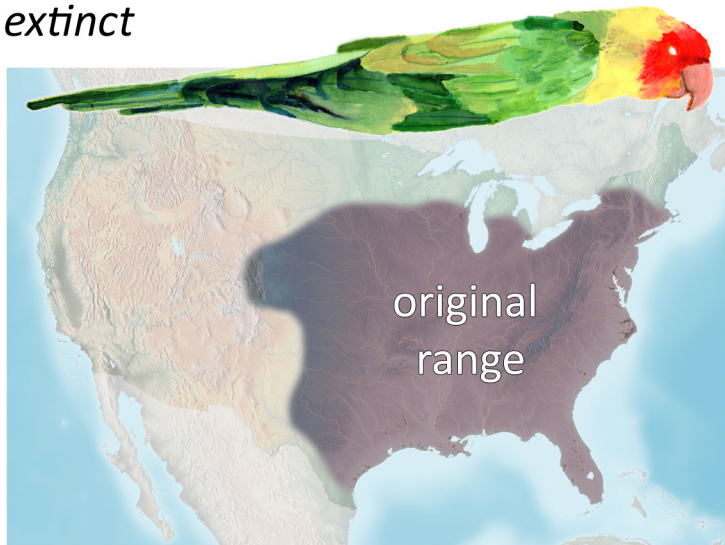
extinct



Passenger pigeons were once the most numerous birds in North America and one of the most numerous birds on the planet. Their pre-18th century population was estimated at 3 to 5 billion. Huge flocks flying over this region would darken the sky for days at a time. They were completely wiped out by the early 20th century. Passenger pigeons were killed by the millions for food and sport. The deforestation of most of the eastern U.S. by European settlers played a major role in their extinction.

Carolina parakeet

extinct



Carolina parakeets were North America's only native parrot and the farthest north ranging parrot in the world. They were once common in this region. Their pre-18th century population numbered in the millions. By the early 20th century, they were completely wiped out due to habitat loss, over-hunting and disease. Habitat transformation by early European settlers in this region shifted populations to the south and east of their range. The last confirmed sighting was a small flock in Florida in 1920. The American Ornithologist Union declared them extinct in 1939.

Bald eagle

extirpated then reintroduced



Bald eagles were historically common in this region but began declining in New York State in the early 1900s. They were rare by the 1950s, and were practically extirpated by the 1960s. Decimated by DDT, by 1974 there was only one non-reproducing pair in New York State. In the 1970s an ambitious reintroduction campaign was started. From 1976 to 1988, 198 eaglets from Alaska and the Great Lakes were brought to New York. The eagle population has grown from three pairs in 1988 to about 123 in 2007. Eagles can be seen throughout the Hudson Valley region.

Peregrine falcon

extirpated then reintroduced



These birds once had around 50 nest sites in the eastern half of New York State. By the early 1960's they became extirpated from this region. They were decimated by the widespread application of DDT. They were deliberately reintroduced into New York City in 1972 by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. In the nineties, new nests were established throughout the New York City region. The reintroduction campaign has continued and they have been expanding their range up the Hudson Valley. They can now be found in this region again.

Wild Turkey

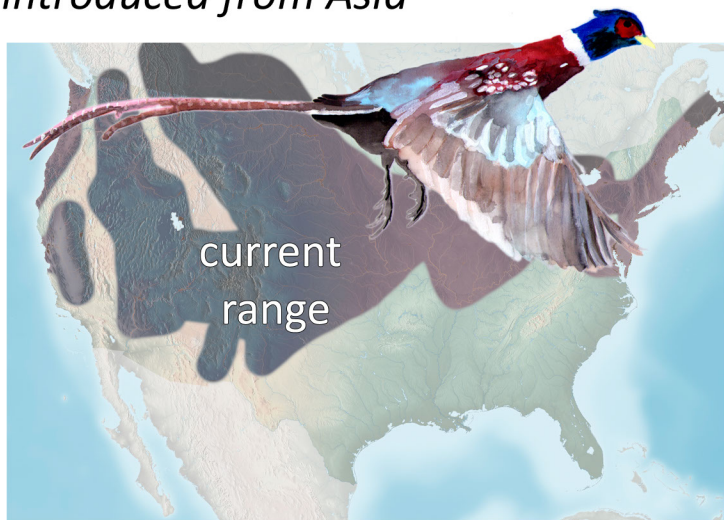
extirpated then reintroduced



These birds are associated with heavily forested land, where they feed on fallen acorns, beechnuts, and other nuts. They were hunted almost to extinction by the mid-1800s, and were extirpated from New York State by 1844. A small number survived in south-central Pennsylvania, which slowly expanded its range as farms reverted to woodland and forests recovered from logging. The turkey was deliberately reintroduced in New York State starting in 1959. The population in this region is now large enough for them to be considered common.

Ring-necked pheasant

introduced from Asia



These birds were first introduced into North America in 1857. They have become established throughout the northern US and southern Canada. They have been extensively introduced to other areas around the world by humans since at least the time of the Roman Empire, making them one of the oldest human-distributed animals on the planet. They are now common on every continent except Antarctica. A highly popular game bird in North America, pheasants are among the most commonly hunted birds on the planet.

Mute Swan

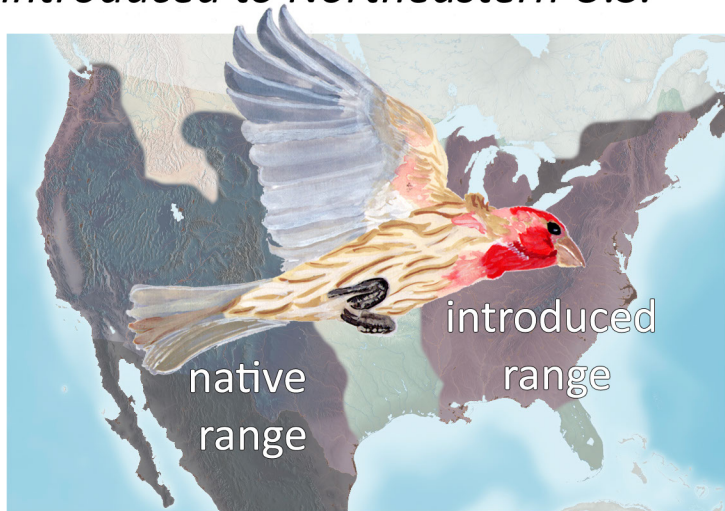
introduced from Europe



Between 1910 and 1912 over five hundred mute swans were brought to the United States from Europe. In New England, the birds were displayed as decorative waterfowl in zoos, parks, avicultural collections and private estates. While most of the captive swans in New England had their flight feathers clipped, a small number of birds escaped from captivity in the Hudson Valley in 1910. These escapees, combined with some additional introduced birds, expanded to a population of over four thousand feral mute swans and they are considered an invasive species in many regions.

House finch

introduced to Northeastern U.S.



These birds are native to the southwestern U.S. and Mexico. In the early 1940's, an unknown number of house finches were released in Nassau County on Long Island. The release was the result of a failed attempt to illegally market the birds as "Hollywood Finches." After several years, the birds established breeding populations and went on to spread throughout eastern North America. Thanks to their bright coloration, and their similarity to locally native purple finches, people usually welcome house finches more than other introduced birds.

House Sparrow

introduced from Europe



House sparrows, which are actually a type of finch, were introduced to the United States by Nicholas Pike, Director of the Brooklyn Institute in 1851 and 1852. He released them along the East River in Brooklyn. From there, and aided by subsequent introductions in the New York area and elsewhere, they successfully spread across the continent, following humans wherever they lived in significant numbers. With an estimated population of over 150 million, they are now considered one of the most numerous of all North American birds.

European starling

introduced from Europe



Between 1890 and 1891, Eugene Schieffelin introduced approximately 60 pairs of European starlings into New York City's Central Park. In just a few decades starlings spread across the continent. They are now one of the most common North American birds. In fall and winter, starlings put on spectacular aerial displays, flying in perfect synchronicity like a school of fish. They have the ability to mimic other sounds, including human speech. Their ability to talk made them a once popular pet in Europe. In this region they can be seen in towns, urban areas, industrial areas and farms.

Rock pigeon

introduced from Europe



Rock pigeons were first introduced by French settlers in Nova Scotia in 1606 and are now one of the most common birds on the continent. Pigeons have been associated with humans for more than 5000 years. They have been used as food, pets, messengers, religious symbols and for racing. They are highly intelligent, adaptable and can be found almost anywhere humans live in large numbers. In this region, they can be found mainly in human built environments.

A note on bird feeding by BD Collier:

Let me be as clear as possible: wild birds do not need us to feed them. Then why do we feed them, and should we feed them at all? Opinions are mixed on the subject. Some say bird feeding spreads disease, attracts predators and pests, unnaturally affects population size and does no real good for the birds themselves. Others believe that bird feeders are a way to help people interact with wild animals in a relatively benign way. My position is closer to the latter and this is why I have included feeders as part of my art installation at the Sluisaw Research Forest. Bird feeders are a good way to attract a larger-than-average number of birds to a centralized location for the sole purpose of helping people see them. My specific goal is to allow people to view some of the birds that currently live in this regrown forest, while thinking about the natural history of the region and the birds that once lived here.

If you choose to feed birds where you live, please use high-quality seed like black oil sunflower and nyjer thistle, clean your feeders regularly, and work to create a safe environment for these wild animals. Providing clean water and shelter in the form of native trees or shrubs will increase the number and diversity of birds that come to your feeder. By joining The Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project Feeder Watch or The National Audubon Society's Great Backyard Bird Count, you can shift from just a backyard bird watcher into a collaborative citizen-scientist and help us all learn more about our current bird populations.

Bird Shift: Greene County, NY edition
and corresponding
sculptural installation
sponsored by:

Greene County Council on the Arts
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Cornell University
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