

# Songbird Decline: How You Can Help!

By Bonalyn Mosteller

Yikes! The number of songbirds in North America has declined from 10 billion to 7 billion in the last 50 years!! And so far, the overall rate of decline isn't slowing down, according to National Audubon Society data. This article identifies several specific actions that families can take in our small corner of Pennsylvania to help slow this loss--even slightly--to help our fragile songbirds.

## **Habitat Degradation (less habitat available for birds' food and breeding)**

Here are very common forms of habitat degradation in Pennsylvania: more roads and macadam, more pipelines laid through forests, more houses and malls, more non-native trees and plants. You are probably thinking that you can't do much about any of these really big issues. But let's stop a minute to "think locally". Here are some things you *can do* in your own yard to help.

First, use dead branches, piles of weeds, etc. to create a "brush heap" in a back corner of your yard. Adding such habitat helps keep birds safe from predators and especially aids small birds who nest and feed near the ground.

Second, if a tree dies in your yard, let it become a "standing dead" tree (unless it might fall on your house). Pennsylvania has many cavity-nesting birds which require holes in trees or other structures for their nesting sites. Examples are woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, bluebirds and owls.

Third, install bird houses, feeders and sources of water on your property. Books have been written on this subject for your further research that explain in detail what works best for different habitats that you might have on your property. But please remember that these structures must also be maintained regularly in order truly to benefit birds. Some birds won't nest in a box which already has a nest in it, so nests need to be cleaned out at least once a year. Bird feeders and bird baths need to be cleaned frequently so that parasites and other dangers for birds are mitigated. In the heat of summer, hummingbird feeders should be cleaned and refilled every few days.

Fourth, consider stopping usage of chemicals on your lawn or maybe even parts of your lawn. Doing so allows your lawn to grow more diverse plants, meaning that it will have more types of food available for insects –and in turn for birds who eat the insects. Some people told me that this past summer seemed to be a bumper year for clover in their yards. While birds don't eat clover, they definitely thrive on the many types of insects which feed on clover flowers. Also, many chemicals kill invertebrates (think earthworms) and insects which live in grass, thus decreasing food supplies for birds. Increasing research also questions the safety of chemicals for people and dogs who play in yards. Children may be especially susceptible to long-term effects of such chemicals.

### **Outdoor Cats**

Many of you will be surprised to learn that outdoor cats are also another major cause of bird deaths, estimated to be around 2.4 billion deaths per year. That's "billion" with a "b". This number may be a bit more believable if we also realize that there are tens of millions of cats that are outdoors in the U.S.

While it is true that feral cats (stray, ownerless cats which live outdoors) contribute more to these numbers than do our indoor cats who go outdoors sometimes, it is estimated that 35% of household cats also hunt outdoors. Keeping our cats indoors actually benefits them because indoor cats tend to live longer.

For decades it has been thought that putting a bell on a cat's collar informed birds about approaching cats. More recent research tells us that this is not the case and that new "cat pillow collars" work better. These are easily available online, such as the one shown in the picture available at [birdsbesafe.com](http://birdsbesafe.com).

### **Birds Ingesting Lead**

Finally, because we live in an area where hunting and fishing are such beloved activities, I will mention the danger of fishing lures and weights or gun ammunition that contains lead. If an eagle, for example, eats a dead deer, it can ingest a lead bullet fragment which can result in lead poisoning. If such eagles are lucky enough to be taken to a rehabilitation center, recovery requires months, if interventions are successful at all. Please ask your hunting and fishing friends and relatives about the type of metal in their ammo and lures.

These actions can turn you and your family into champions for our beloved birds!

Photo credits:

1. A brush pile built and photographed by the author.
2. Pileated woodpecker raising young in a 'standing dead' tree. Roger Williams, 2013 Audubon Photo Award.
3. An example of a more effective collar for outdoor cats from [birdsbesafe.com](http://birdsbesafe.com).

