

GUEST ESSAY

Lights Out, America! (Songbirds Are Counting on Us.)

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**By Margaret Renkl**

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

NASHVILLE — One morning last fall, during the height of the songbird migration, I opened my door to the glorious autumn light and saw a yellow-rumped warbler lying on my front stoop. I knew it was dead before I opened the storm door. A living warbler does not lie with its elegant passerine toes curled into a tiny cage of tiny bones holding nothing.

Yellow-rumped warblers don't breed in Middle Tennessee. This one was migrating to its wintering grounds, either here or farther south. Migrating birds are vulnerable to many hazards: predators, extreme weather, insufficient food and insufficient water. Glass is particularly treacherous. Expanses of glass — windows without mullions, storm doors, skyscrapers — are the worst.

During the daytime, glass reflects the living world: It tricks birds into thinking that the sky lies safely before them, though what actually lies ahead is an invisible, neck-breaking solidity. At night, when most birds migrate, lights pose another threat. Artificial lights attract birds, which then become disoriented, crashing into windows, buildings and one another or flying until they collapse, unable to see their way past the light.

The height of the fall migration season runs from around mid-September to around mid-October. It's mind-boggling to check the real-time migration map at BirdCast each night and discover just how many millions of birds are migrating

and where they are. At any given time, tens of thousands of them may be right overhead.

Up to a billion birds die in window strikes every year because of daytime reflections or nighttime lights. There are several ways to make expanses of glass safer for birds. But the best way to make the migration seasons safer overall is also the easiest to do: Just turn out the lights. Many outdoor lights are merely decorative anyway and can be safely turned off, especially during the crucial weeks of the migration season. And there's almost always a bird-safe way to adjust the lights that are truly necessary.

Consider what happened in 2016 at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., where a giant cross rises 60 feet above a grassy park at the very edge of the Cumberland Plateau. War Memorial Cross is illuminated at night by spotlights. There is no other ambient light in the deeply forested area.

That's a problem for migrating birds, as the biologist and celebrated nonfiction author David George Haskell noted in a blog post about what happened one cloudy night in September, when more than 130 birds got caught in the light dome and died. The pictures in his post have haunted me ever since.

The university faced what seemed to be an irresolvable conundrum. Students can't safely wander around a park on the edge of a deadly bluff in the pitch-black night. But birds can't migrate safely without darkness, and the forests surrounding the university are part of a critical flyway for migrating birds. As Dr. Haskell wrote, "Every bird taking the overland route from the northern U.S. or the vast Canadian boreal forest is winging through the Southeast."

But the conundrum wasn't irresolvable, as it turned out. It wasn't even hard to fix. Within hours of finding the dead birds, the university's offices of Environmental Stewardship & Sustainability and Physical Plant Services came up with an alternative: According to Nathan Wilson, the domain manager at Sewanee, they simply swapped out the two 1,000-watt halogen lamps with two 400-watt-equivalent LED clusters. The plan worked. In the six years since the university dimmed the lights, no dead birds have been reported at the foot of the cross.

The human population has also adjusted: “Initially, I did receive complaints that the cross was too dimly lit, but everyone is used to it now,” Mr. Wilson said in an email.

At our best as a species, this is what we do: We change our ways to protect others, and then we adjust to the new ways. Soon, we can’t remember doing things differently. This is why lights-out initiatives are spreading across the country. Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Indianapolis, Miami, Minneapolis-St. Paul, San Francisco, St. Louis and a host of other cities, large and small, are working to create safe passage for migrating birds.

Birds are in profound crisis, and these efforts can make a measurable difference in their populations: A 2021 study by Field Museum scientists analyzed 20 years of data collected at Chicago’s McCormick Place convention center. The researchers found that merely darkening the windows resulted in a roughly 60 percent reduction in bird mortality. That study points the way to other accommodations. In New York, the Sept. 11 memorial lights are now turned off for 20 minutes at a time to give disoriented birds a chance to disperse.

Homeowners can do their part, too. If you can’t turn off all your lights, identify the ones that are truly necessary and reduce the wattage or reorient them in a way that is safer for wildlife. Lights triggered by motion detectors are far less dangerous for birds than continuously burning lights, for example. The same is true for hooded lights that direct the illumination downward rather than into the sky. Indoors, draw the curtains and close the blinds after dark. Turn off lights in empty rooms. Use lamps instead of overhead lights in the room you’re in.

Migration seasons don’t last very long, so it isn’t strictly necessary to make these changes permanently, but it would be better for wildlife, and better for the climate, if we did. Vast numbers of wild creatures are nocturnal. They evolved to hunt — and to avoid being hunted — in darkness. And as the writer Paul Bogard points out in “The End of Night,” darkness is good for us, too. We evolved to rest in darkness.

I thought my husband and I had long ago made our house as bird-safe as possible. We followed the recommendations of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, hanging screens on our windows and putting closely spaced stickers on the glass

storm doors. We just didn't make the house safe enough. Before I tucked the doomed yellow-rumped warbler under a tree, where some hungry scavenger could at least make a meal of it, I studied its curling feet, its flawless plumage. It broke my heart. The only thing wrong with that perfect little bird was our storm door, which had somehow drawn it from its nighttime path.

We'll never be able to make this house completely safe for our wild neighbors, but that warbler was a reminder to take even more care with lights and glass, especially during the migration seasons. I have no choice but to try. It's hard enough to feel powerless in the face of the many dangers my own species has created for the species whose ecosystems we share. It's far worse to feel personally responsible for those dangers, too.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books "Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South" and "Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss."

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