

Why Birds Matter

The cover of the January National Geographic magazine shows a close-up of a bald eagle with the words, “Why Birds Matter” below in bold letters. I expected to find an article inside about all the things birds do for humans, and there was some of that, but it turns out that this issue was just the beginning of a series of articles in what National Geographic calls the “Year of the Bird.” And the reason for that is that 2018 is the centennial of the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act which protects more than 1000 species of birds.

As Jonathan Franzen, the author of the main article in this month’s edition, says of birds, “They are our last best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding.” He says, “Things with feathers can be found in every corner of every ocean and in land habitats so bleak that they’re habitats for nothing else...the only forms of life more widely distributed than birds are microscopic.”

Some birds do some pretty incredible things. A bar-tailed godwit has been tracked flying from Alaska to New Zealand, more than 7000 miles, in 9 days. The ruby-throated hummingbird uses up a third of its body weight crossing the Gulf of Mexico. A red knot has been recorded flying from Tierra del Fuego to the Canadian Arctic enough times to add up to the distance to the moon!

It is important to note that birds have been on this planet a lot longer than humans—150 million years more! Franzen calls the house finch outside your window “a beautifully adapted living dinosaur.”

There are some things in which birds directly benefit humans—some are edible, some eat insect and rodent pests, some plants are pollinated by birds, and birds also help to spread seeds. And while canaries are no longer used in coal mines, some folks may argue they still provide that function to warn of declining habitats worldwide.

But, Franzen would argue, “Do we really need birds to tell us a marsh is polluted or a forest has been slashed? They’re the most vivid and widespread representatives of the Earth as it was before people.”

It is argued by some that they are sorry about the birds (or threatened species xxx), but that humans come first, and the needs of any other species can’t inconvenience us in any measurable way—basically a selfish view of humans in the world.

Others may also assert that humans come first, but do so because they see humans as not like other animals because of our consciousness, free will and ability to remember the past and plan for the future.

And for people who hold this latter view, Franzen said the following. “If we’re incomparably more worthy than other animals, shouldn’t our ability to discern right from wrong, and to knowingly sacrifice some small fraction of our convenience for a larger

good, make us more susceptible to the claims of nature? Doesn't having a unique ability carry with it a unique responsibility?" And to that last statement, I would say, indeed!

Birds can't clean-up pollution, or reverse the decline in an overgrazed or overbrowsed habitat, or prevent the introduction of exotic plants and animals—but we can. And we are even smart enough to see the beginnings of environmental destruction and stop it before catastrophic results occur.

What we can do, also, is to abide by Aldo Leopold's teachings that every species of plant or animal in the natural world has a place in that habitat and should be protected and conserved, including mankind. But that no species, including mankind, should be protected or conserved at the expense of another if at all possible.

If you wouldn't want trees, or grass, or wildflowers or creeks and rivers to disappear, then you should also not want to see the destruction of birds, or mammals, or reptiles or amphibians, or insects.

The one thing that sets birds apart, other than they have feathers and can fly, is that birds are probably most often seen and taken notice of by most humans on a regular basis—because they are everywhere, they live among us, and most are not that fearful of us.

Show a child a bird flying or hopping or pecking and his/her eyes will light up. But the same can be said if you show a child a rabbit, or a frog, or a raccoon, or a bee or a butterfly. One might argue that if for no other reason than the reaction of a child, all of these things should be protected and appreciated.

Until next time...

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