

## Marking the Migrants' Return

*Alison Robey, Kent Land Trust Correspondent*

Last weekend, an early spring hike down the Housatonic River by Bull's Bridge ended with a unique highlight: not a stirring view or an impressive summit, but a faint, familiar call ringing through the trees.

*Fee-bee! Fee-bee!*

This was a sound I hadn't heard since the warm days and bright colors of September, a sound that immediately invoked images of sun-kissed goldenrod, blue summer skies, and whirring cicadas. This was the song of the Eastern Phoebe.

Named for the sound of its iconic call (perhaps better spelled *Phoe-bee! Phoe-bee!*), the Eastern Phoebe has long been a favorite of mine. Easily recognized by their silly habit of [enthusiastically wagging their tails](#), these gray flycatchers spend their summers perched on rooftops edges, errant branches, and stray fenceposts, occasionally leaping skyward in an impressive show of aerial acrobatics to capture whatever flies, wasps, or beetles flutter past. A pair even built a mossy nest on the side of our house last year, leaving their wide-beaked babies to peer hungrily down at our deck throughout much of the summer.

Why such excitement, then, to hear even a whisper of a bird I see so often? Because the tail-wagging Phoebe is one of our very first spring migrants. Like many of our birds, phoebes are a familiar sight in the warmer months, but spend their winters in warmer, buggier climates down south. The song of the Phoebe is a harbinger of those soon to follow: the majestic, pescatarian Ospreys, soaring high over the river; the bright chattering and feline shrieks of the Gray Catbirds, perched noisily amidst the thickets; and, of course, the rainbow of tiny, sweet-singing warblers, resplendent in their brightest breeding plumage and on their way to nesting habitats far to the north.



Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*)



Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*)

Like most birdwatchers, I'll observe the arrival of these far-traveled migrants with delight. But when every glimpse of the bright golden patch on the back end of the aptly named Yellow-Rumped Warbler and every trill of fluting Veery song is cause for celebration, it's easy to forget how much trouble these little animals are in.



Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*)

Our birds may seem quite plentiful, but compared to even fifty years ago, their numbers are shockingly few. Recent [estimates](#) show a 29% decline in North American birds since 1970: nearly 3 billion individual birds gone, with some of the greatest losses in temperate forest ecosystems like our own.

Obstacles like reduced food sources, habitat loss, changing weather patterns, and even increasing numbers of windows for birds to fly into or outdoor cats for birds to be eaten by have all made the complicated lives of our avian neighbors significantly more treacherous. The consequences are widespread: ecosystems that rely on birds for seed dispersal, pollination, pest control, and simply the intrinsic joy they bring are suffering as a result.

With that sad trend in mind, the first phoebe of spring prompted me to take one of the simplest possible steps towards protecting our birds: pulling out my smartphone, opening the app labeled ‘eBird,’ and adding ‘1 Eastern Phoebe’ to the checklist of birds I had identified on my walk.

As I hopped back into my car, I also added the White-Breasted Nuthatch clucking at me from a nearby tree trunk and the spiraling flock of Turkey Vultures drifting in the wind overhead to the list, before [submitting it](#) to the location the app suggested: Bull’s Bridge itself. Inside eBird, Bull’s Bridge is referred to as a ‘hotspot’ – places where enough people go birding often enough that it’s worth compiling the data and computing statistics like how many species have been seen there in total. Such hotspots now exist [all over town](#) in key locations, from the bridge over the Housatonic on 341 to Hatch Pond and Kent Falls.



Yellow-Rumped Warbler  
(*Setophaga coronata*)

Anyone can add to this dataset simply by downloading the [eBird app](#) and taking note of each bird they identify at their location. For birders still learning how to distinguish the nuances of feather coloration and song patterns (like myself!), I recommend pairing it with the free [Merlin app](#)—a nifty tool created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology—which tells you which bird species you are likely to see in different places, identifies any bird songs you record, and provides a useful handbook of photos and information for any species you would like to know more about.



White-Breasted Nuthatch  
(*Sitta carolinensis*)

As fun as these apps are—particularly once eBird starts tallying up the total number of species you’ve identified, a surprisingly addictive hobby!—it might not be immediately clear how checklists and hotspots actually help conserve birds. Yet the data gathered by each birder plays a critical role in the global efforts to create accurate range maps of where birds occur and breed, as well as where populations are exhibiting growth or decline. You can take a look at the species data yourself on their website; [here](#), for example, is the projected range for every week of the year for the migrant Blackburnian Warbler (just hit play to watch their 5,000 mile migration!). These statistics represent one of the world’s largest and most highly utilized pools of citizen science

data; they are used every day by scientists, policy makers, and conservation organizations to figure out how to best protect our feathered friends.



As the migrants begin returning over the next couple of months, you, too, can participate in this great effort to understand what's going on with your backyard birds. With the wealth of data available on eBird, organizations as far afield as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and as close at hand as Kent Land Trust itself are better positioned to protect and preserve our most vulnerable species and the habitats they depend on. Conservation efforts are further informed by the nearly 800 research papers published using eBird's data since the app's launch in 2002, with 159 works based on the data submitted by each and every user in 2022 alone. Combining the raw data with this extensive research helps inform a clearer picture of where,

why, and how the preservation of birds requires immediate attention, increasing the chances that conservation actions will be as efficient and effective as possible.

Though simple, every bird logged is another step towards preserving their intrinsic beauty and indispensable ecosystem services as predators, pollinators, and propagators in the forests and towns that depend on them. Each bird we see can also be a reminder of the other small ways we can help them; for example, perhaps if your lawn houses a few more native plants or a little less grass this year, the extra caterpillars and nectar can fuel the hungry chicks of breeding Eastern Bluebirds, Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds, and Scarlet Tanagers (for those interested, Merlin offers a great list of other important individual conservation actions [here!](#)).



However small it may be, we each have a part to play in reversing the decline of our birds. Take a look around your yard or a stroll through Kent's forests this spring—keep an eye out for our birds, especially as our migrants return from their winter vacations. If we want them to stick around, it's up to us to take whatever actions we can to keep them here... even when that action is as simple as logging spring's first phoebe on eBird.

*Special thank you to Cody Limber for sharing his bird photography for this article! See more of his work [here](#).*