

## Vital Habitat

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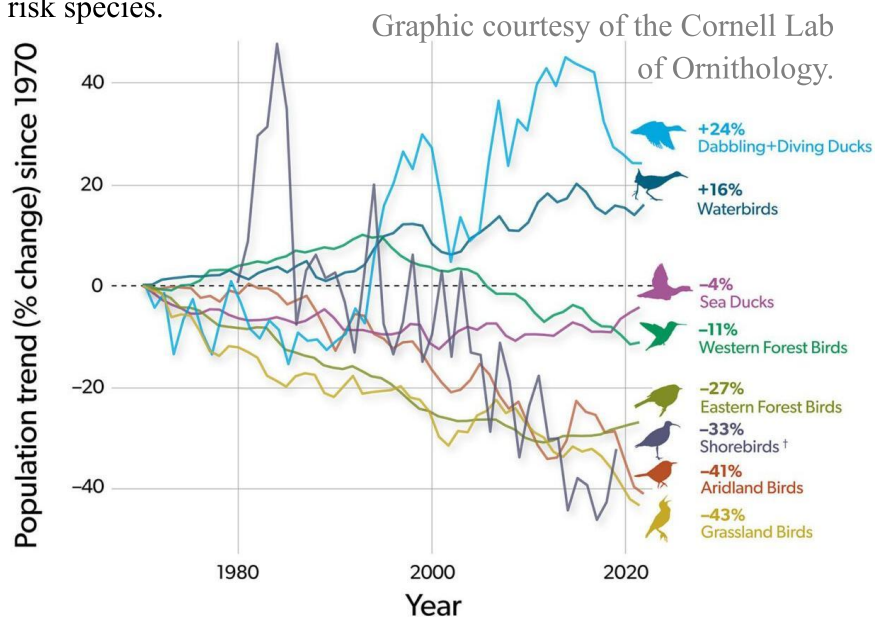


A place like Kent demonstrates the truth about the notion that everyone knows everyone in a small town: I rarely make it through a trip to the IGA or the House of Books without running into someone who greets me by name. As I have gotten more involved in the birding community, however, this turn of phrase has taken on a new dimension; now, I rarely run into birders who don't know about my little hometown. The reason? One tiny, 3-ounce-small bird: [the Cerulean Warbler](#).

Cerulean Warblers are spunky blue-gray songbirds that winter in South America on the slopes of the Andes and summer on our very own Housatonic River. Given their preferred perches at the very top of towering riverside Cottonwood trees, they're quite tricky to see, but you are almost guaranteed to hear their buzzy *zrey-zrey-zrey-zrey-zee* calls on a stroll down River Road's muddy, heavily forested tracks between May and July. It's one of the only places in the whole state where observing this little warbler is a near guarantee – and that is because it relies on the mature forests and thriving insect populations of Kent to build their nests and feed their young.

Sadly, these birds are currently categorized as a 'Tipping Point' species, or a species that has lost at least 50% of its population since 1970. Such species are identified by the "[State of the Birds](#)" report, published annually by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative in collaboration with groups like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. It identifies trends in conservation risk for different species and habitat types, as well as key conservation actions critical for protecting high risk species.

Recent news has often been discouraging. The plight of the birds first come to widespread attention in 2019, [when a landmark study showed that we have lost 3 billion birds](#) – one quarter of the total population – since 1970. Last year's report showed a continuation of the same troubling trend: our birds are still declining. While some of the biggest losses are in groups like grassland or shore



birds (which are losing habitat at the fastest rates), [Eastern Forest Birds](#) – our birds – are the fourth most impacted group. We’ve lost 27% of our bird populations in my parents’ lifetime.

Why are birds declining so quickly? The top reason by far is [loss of suitable habitat](#). Increasingly intensive agricultural usage and urbanization physically diminish the space available for birds to live in by replacing native forests, grasslands, and wetlands with monocultures of crops and lawns or infrastructure like asphalt and buildings. The same disasters challenging humans – sea level rise, widespread droughts or heatwaves, unnaturally intense wildfires – affect nature as well; when habitats shrink to make way for humans, animals have nowhere to hide from these disasters.



What natural space remains is also growing more difficult to live in. Trends like invasive species spread and overuse of pesticides are contributing to structural changes to our ecosystems, making the insects central to native species’ diets – particularly important for the nutrition of growing chicks! – much harder to find. Climate change often adds even more stress: recent heatwaves, for example, are the sorts of unusual event that [can be extremely deadly for baby birds and thus lead to widespread nest failures](#). Our birds just aren’t adapted to deal with too much extreme heat, especially while nesting. When many birds are also killed by [deadly collisions with windows, strikes by cars, and hunting by outdoor cats](#), the crisis intensifies.

As troubling as these trends are, the 2025 State of the Birds report reminded me of a silver lining. The [executive summary](#) highlights that “private lands conservation programs, and voluntary conservation partnerships for working lands, hold some of the best opportunities for sparking immediate turnarounds for birds” – and Kent already has some such programs in the works.



One of those projects is called the [Macedonia Forest Block Important Bird Area](#). It’s a 22.5-thousand-acre landscape spanning northern Kent and southern Sharon, identified by the Audubon Society and its partners as an ‘[Important Bird Area](#)’ (or IBA) because of its critical value for biodiversity conservation. Such areas function through collaborative efforts between land trusts, conservation organizations, and private landowners. The Macedonia Forest Block, for example,

was identified as a vitally important habitat due to diligent work describing the area’s species and habitats by the folks at the [Sharon Audubon](#), as well as through a huge breadth of bird occurrence data gathered by bird banders like Lorie Doss (and eBird users like all of us!). Advocacy by groups like the Sharon Audubon and KLT earned funding from partners like the Cornell Lab to establish and – in collaboration with local landowners – implement [a forest management plan](#) to keep this forest a safe haven for the species that need it most. In this case, that means birds like the [Wood Thrush](#), which can only successfully raise young in mature, undisturbed Eastern forests, as well as our friend from the start of this article, the elusive Cerulean Warbler.



Such collaborations aim to minimize the loss and degradation of vital habitats while recognizing that conservation organizations simply can’t own all the land needed to protect entire essential ecosystems or conserve every vulnerable species. Important Bird Areas rely instead on cooperation with local landowners to facilitate management plans that work for everyone, often by supporting education about taking good care of your own property. Successful collaborations have been facilitated by, for example, organizing ‘[conservation speed dating](#)’ workshops, where interested landowners are introduced to local conservation practitioners who can answer key questions about how and why to manage habitats one way or another. For those who own land near the Macedonia Forest Block, engaging with such efforts is a fantastic way to participate in one of the most promising avenues for reversing the accelerating decline of birds.

For the rest of us, there are still ways to help. Consciously caring for whatever land you are responsible for is essential, whether that means limiting pesticide and insecticide use, chopping



down some invasive vines, or just keeping your cat inside. The impact of knowing about and caring for your environment can’t be overstated, especially when simply knowing which species rely on your local ecosystem is the first step; your contribution can start as small as opening up eBird on your next walk outside. Records of those Cerulean Warblers singing throughout the spring helped preserve their vital habitats. As spring migration comes to a close and the resident birds begin their summer nesting efforts, who knows what species you’ll find!