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The Observer Wildlife

The Observer view on Britain's Big Garden Birdwatch: take pleasure in counting birds, but don't ignore the threats they face

Observer editorial

This weekend you can enjoy citizen science at its most relaxing, even though it will highlight the challenges facing UK wildlife

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Starlings once filled our city skies but their numbers have dropped by 87% since the 1960s. Photograph: Andy Hay/RSPB Images

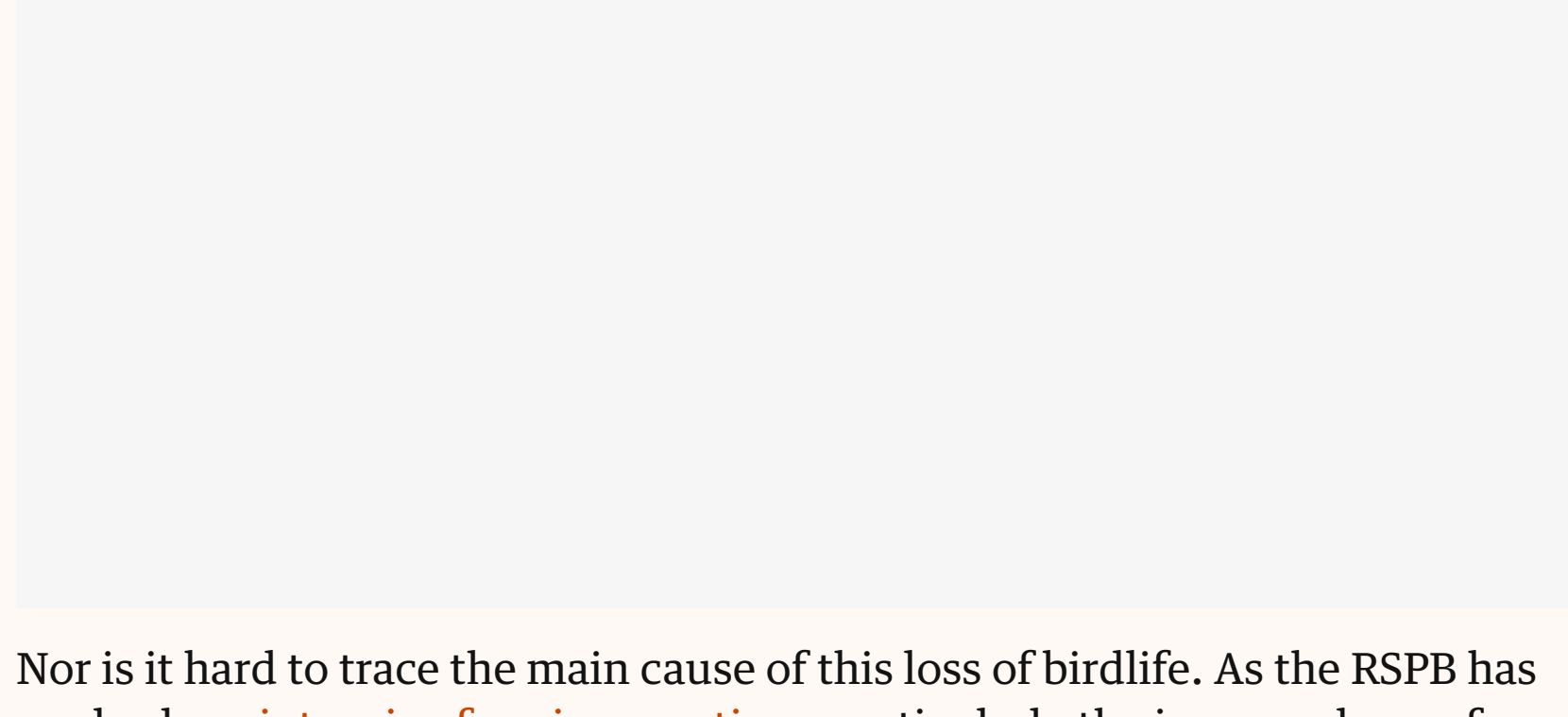
Whether it is a starling squabbling with a neighbour or a few goldfinches bringing a blaze of colour to a garden, there is much to be said for bird-watching. This will be particularly evident this weekend with the culmination of the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch when an estimated half a million people will spend an hour counting every avian guest that perches on their lawns and bushes.

Lucky individuals may get a glimpse of an airborne rarity such as the waxwing, an elusive, crested visitor to the UK that has been arriving in unexpected numbers this winter - an event known as an irruption. Most will have to settle for house sparrows, starlings or wood pigeons. It will be 60 minutes well spent nevertheless. Bird-watching is the simplest way for us to make contact with wildlife. Sit at a window with a coffee and a notepad and let nature come to you. This is citizen science at its most relaxing. At the same time, the recording of bird prevalence in our gardens has an important role to play in UK conservation. Indeed, it has become a vital instrument in helping biologists obtain a detailed snapshot of the state of our wildlife. Unfortunately, that picture has become one of increasing concern.

Consider the starling, a bird that once filled city skies in dark, swirling clouds. Its numbers have dropped by 87% since the 1960s. At the same time, the nation has lost more than 10m pairs of house sparrows, while the song thrush has declined in numbers by 76%. One estimate suggests that more than 600m breeding birds have been lost to the EU and UK over the past four decades.

Biodiversity loss is having a crippling impact across the country

These are staggering, numbing figures which - backed by surveys of other populations of birds and animals - show that biodiversity loss is having a crippling impact across the country. In the past, we have tended to think about key conservation issues in terms of threats to rare but photogenic creatures such as the golden eagle or puffin. Exercises like the Big Garden Birdwatch have revealed the sad fact that all British wildlife is being menaced, right down to the common songbirds with which we once shared our parks and gardens.



Nor is it hard to trace the main cause of this loss of birdlife. As the RSPB has made clear, intensive farming practices, particularly the increased use of pesticides and fertilisers, have been the main drivers of most bird population declines in the UK since the end of the Second World War. The fact that farming could affect all birds, even those in inner cities and suburbia, may seem unlikely.

However, almost three-quarters of the UK is made up of farmland. What happens there affects birds in all habitats. In effect, our urban and suburban avian populations are overflows from the countryside. It would therefore be tempting to blame farmers for this unsettling state of affairs and press for quick measures to cut farm yields. Biodiversity loss would be slowed and carbon emissions cut. However, such rapid impositions would be risky.

A look at the widespread riots in Europe prompted by regulations to limit farm yields underlines the dangers. Farmers' unhappiness has been exploited and fuelled by far-right groups determined to undermine the EU which has introduced measures to limit intensive land use and so protect the environment. The result has been the barricading of roads and the muck spraying of government buildings.

The UK needs to avoid such confrontation while, at the same time, pulling back from the intensification of its agriculture. This must be done with the cooperation, not the opposition, of those who farm our land. Speed must be mixed with caution, in short.

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