

The populations of some Latin American birds are declining, even in the countries they symbolize.

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The American tropics are uniquely blessed with birds. Thirty-six percent of the world's 11,000 bird species live in the region south of the border between the United States and Mexico, more than in Asia or Africa.

By Elaine Chen

That diversity is reflected in the national birds chosen to represent the countries of Latin America, from the slight southern lapwing — Uruguay's avian symbol — to the 30-pound Andean condor, the national bird of four countries. Some birds carry Indigenous

cultural importance; others were once ubiquitous in, or are endemic to, their countries. But an increasingly common characteristic is a decline in their numbers, sometimes even in the nations they represent. **Golden eagle (Mexico)**



Mexico, and its population is probably shrinking. Recent estimates suggest that there may be only about 200 adult birds left in Mexico, Dr. Ruelas said, although more formal nationwide surveys need to be conducted.

Start from the basics. Begin with something foundational: <u>Learn to identify a</u> few of the birds most commonly seen near where you live. Digital tools like the Merlin Bird ID app can help. If you spot a bird, pay attention to things like the size, color, behavior, location and date. Binoculars and field guides might help, but are not necessary to get started.

Resplendent quetzal (Guatemala)

The resplendent quetzal migrates between forests at higher and lower elevations to

feed and breed, so it requires a contiguous habitat to thrive. Andrew Spencer; Cornell Lab of

Habitat loss is a major factor in the decline of bird populations across the region. Around 13 percent of forest in Latin America and the Caribbean has been lost in the last 30 years, primarily because

serpent-headed god of the Aztecs and the Maya, and were once used as money; the currency of modern Guatemala is called the quetzal. But the quetzal's habitat requirements and reliance on varieties of avocado make it vulnerable to climate change and deforestation. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has classified the resplendent quetzal's population as near threatened.

Andean condor (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador)

high-elevation cloud forests and feeds in lower-elevation forests.

The quetzal's iridescent green feathers adorned Quetzalcoatl, the

largest flying birds, has a 10-foot wingspan, and weighs up to 33 pounds. Bolivia and Chile are strongholds for the species, but the population as a whole is vulnerable, and the condor barely has a presence in Colombia and Ecuador. A survey in 2015 by the Andean

make them charismatic national symbols but can also attract human persecution. **Southern lapwing (Uruguay) Rufous hornero (Argentina)**

The southern lapwing (Vanellus chilensis) and the rufous hornero

(Furnarius rufus), both of which prefer grasslands and pastures,

have actually benefited from the conversion of woodlands into

In Uruguay, southern lapwings are

rugby team. Ian Davies; Cornell Lab of

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called teros, which is also the nickname

for the Uruguayan international men's

The intimidating features and size of raptors, such as the golden

eagle, the condor and Panama's harpy eagle (Harpia harpyja),

in water. • A Feathered Icon Breeds Again: New Zealand's national bird, the kiwi, has hatched eggs in the wild in the Wellington area for the first time in living memory, thanks to a multiyear conservation effort. • Data Collection: Volunteers recorded important data on a strip of land in Alabama that serves as a pit stop for avian migrators. Here is what they learned.

Most Argentines can easily find their national bird, the hornero —

named for the oven like clay nests, or horneros, it builds — even in

the parks of Buenos Aires. "They get people excited," Dr. Renjifo

said. "It brings that connection between birds and people."

have suffered declines over the past 20 to 40 years. Raptors play crucial

ecological roles, and losing them could have major consequences on

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adept tool users, are the first parrots found to alter their food by dipping it

Scarlet macaws are extinct in many parts of Central America, but forest preservation

With so many beautiful birds in Latin America, poaching for the

international pet market has become a significant problem,

including for the scarlet macaw (Ara macao).

that pay former hunters to become stewards.

But those accomplishments remain tenuous.

and other conservation efforts have helped increase their numbers. Andrew Spencer;

Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library

Scarlet macaw (Honduras)

scarlet macaw is vulnerable in Honduras. But it has made some recent progress in the region, thanks to forest preservation efforts; programs like Macaw Mountain, which combines tourism with conservation; and arrangements, like one in the Mosquitia region,

collection, and conservation efforts can take decades to yield results. "It has required resources that have not been available in a lot of the countries where most biodiversity exists," said Viviana Ruiz-Gutierrez, co-director of the Center for Avian Population Studies at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Can a symbol galvanize conservation efforts?

lawyer for the New York City government. She now works on Times events. More about Elaine Chen Share full article

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Central Asia, Europe and the Americas. Mexico is the eagle's southernmost range, according to Ernesto Ruelas Inzunza, an ecologist at the University of Veracruz. Although the bird is featured on items like coins and soccer jerseys, it is endangered in "It's a beautiful bird, and it's well ingrained in our history," Dr. Ruelas said. "But we don't see them very often."

How to Become a Birder

Ornithology | Macaulay Library of agriculture and cattle ranching. Brazil accounts for most of that loss, but Guatemala alone lost more than <u>26 percent of its forests</u> 1.25 million hectares — from 1990 to 2020. That change has had a stark effect on Guatemala's national bird, the resplendent quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno), which breeds in

The International Union of Conservation of Nature has estimated that 6,700 mature condors, at most, remain in the wild. Hederd Torres García; Cornell Lab of Ornithology Macaulay Library Across most of the world, the Andean condor (Vultur gryphus) is identified by a version of its Quechua name, kuntur. It is one of the

Condor Foundation estimated that only around 100 adults remained in Ecuador. Despite the bird's importance in some Indigenous cultures — it is thought that condors carried souls to heaven — it is hunted and poisoned, typically by farmers concerned about their livestock. Condors compete with feral dogs to find carrion, and have sometimes resorted to killing baby cows. "That's a big problem with raptors in places where local communities are close by," said Eliana Montenegro, a conservation officer based in Ecuador with BirdLife International.

The rufous hornero builds domed nests

out of mud and straw. A mating pair

making it available to other birds. Ian

Davies; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay

won't reuse a nest after building it,

farms and cattle ranches.

African ecosystems.

Common birds like these still have a role in mobilizing support for conservation efforts, said Luis Miguel Renjifo, a conservation biologist at the Pontifical Javeriana University. **More on Birds** • Birds of Prey: A new study found that 88% of 42 African raptor species

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The ancient Maya believed that macaws could travel between Earth and heaven, and their colorful feathers adorned the Maya and Aztec elite. Today those feathers — as well as the bird's tolerance for captivity and its ability to mimic human voices make macaws a desirable pet that can fetch upward of \$3,000. Populations are dwindling in much of Central America, and the

And the decline of a species in one country is less likely to attract international funding if the bird's global population is not concerning. Still, Dr. Ruelas and other scientists hope that the local decline of bird species, especially those that are national symbols, will

work together," Dr. Ruelas said.

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prompt the public to participate in monitoring efforts or support research and conservation policies. "A symbol of national identity should be something that makes us

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Elaine Chen joined The Times in 2017 from WNYC public radio. Before media, she was a

Understanding species population trends requires long-term data

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