



The age of extinction

Live ones go in paper bags, dead ones in the freezer: the volunteers saving birds that fly into windows

Across Toronto, a team sets out at dawn to rescue migrating birds that have collided with buildings, and keep a record of the thousands each year that don't make it
By Phoebe Weston. Photographs by Patricia Homonylo

Each year more than a billion birds die in North America after colliding with windows. Volunteers rescue those they can and collect the bodies of others. Their lives are honoured in an annual 'Bird Layout'. This display from 2022 features more than 4,000 birds. Photograph: Patricia Homonylo

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Every morning at dawn, a dozen volunteers scour the streets of Toronto picking up small birds. Some days they will find hundreds of them, most already dead or dying. A few they are able to save. Live birds are put in brown paper bags and driven to wildlife recovery centres, while dead birds are put in a large freezer. If no one picks them up, their carcasses are swept up by street cleaners.

"One of my first days was really horrific," says Sohail Desai, a volunteer with the charity Fatal Light Awareness Program (Flap) Canada, which has about 135 people patrolling the streets across Toronto. Desai was walking close to his house in the North York area in Toronto when a flock of golden-crowned kinglets flew into a 15-storey glass building.

"Everywhere we turned there were birds hitting all over the place. It was quite traumatic. It's not just finding them on the ground, but actually seeing them hit, and that feeling of powerlessness."



Patrols head out before dawn searching the streets for birds that have collided with windows

Desai ended up taking 80 birds to the wildlife centre that day - they could not all fit in his car so he did multiple runs. Another 80 were dead, bound for the freezer. "Some of them died in my hands," he says.

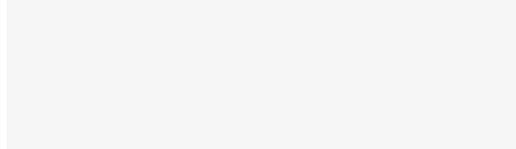
Most countries do not have firm data on how many birds die flying into windows, but it is likely to be extensive in any city on bird migration routes with glass-fronted buildings. In the US, it is estimated that more than a billion birds die each year this way.

About 60% of birds that collide with windows are killed. Sometimes, a single building can be deadly: more than 1,000 birds died on a single day in October 2023 from colliding with the McCormick Place skyscraper in Chicago.



Dead birds are stored in freezers and removed once a year to create the 'Bird Layout'. This provides a time of mourning for the volunteers

In North America, spring migration runs from late March until early June, and autumn migration from late August until the end of October. During this period Desai goes on patrol seven days a week, for up to four hours every morning, starting at sunrise. He has saved hundreds of birds, he says, and possibly in excess of 1,000. He also has a small chest freezer full of dead birds at the end of every year - just from his area.



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Her husband initially joined her because he was worried about her wandering around alone in the dark, and now they go together every morning. "It's mentally draining, so having another person really helps. We can chat, give a hug to each other ... It never gets easier," she says.

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Woodcocks that have flown off course, attracted by bright city lights. The birds are tagged and logged into the Global Bird Collision Mapper to provide data on the scale of collisions

At the end of the season, the 4,000 birds collected by Flap volunteers are laid out in a display showing the scale of the damage. Volunteers can record their findings on the [Global Bird Collision Mapper](#). So far, more than 100,000 birds have been reported as colliding with a window - 73,000 of which died.

"Since I joined Flap, I never see the city in the same way as before," says Miki. It is not necessarily skyscrapers that do the damage - it is regular homes too.

The organisation campaigns for [bird-friendly windows](#), which have patterns of small dots, squares or lines, which birds can see. [Closing blinds or curtains](#) at night, and [turning building lights off](#), can also help.

"One of the reasons I stay and want to continue is that I have met wonderful people who I would never meet otherwise," says Miki. When she is on her morning patrol with her bags and nets, people often ask her what she is doing. "Any opportunity I have to talk to people, I will," she says.

Now, security and cleaning staff who work early will sometimes call and say they have seen a bird, asking if she can help. "Sometimes I get calls at 11pm, with someone saying, 'we have a live bird, is there any way you can come?' And I'll say, of course I can."



A hummingbird beside petals, presumably left by a passerby in homage to the dead bird

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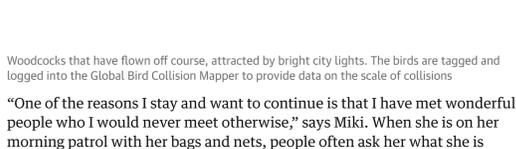
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