



The Wildlife Forecast



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Autumn in Florida brings relief from the suffocating heat and dripping humidity of summer. We Floridians begin to venture outside once again - just in time for the seasonal arrival of unique and abundant migratory birds.

Some of those birds that fly south only rest in Florida before heading to Central and South America. Some stay for a couple of months until their breeding and nesting grounds up north thaw come spring. Then there are those snowbirds that return to the Sunshine State to breed and nest, remaining with us for six months or more.

However, studies are showing these patterns are shifting as a result of warmer overall temperatures. The analogy of the canary in the coal mine is an apt one - birds often are the first harbingers of changing habitats.

"We see trends first in birds because it is so easy to see," said Elena Sachs, with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Florida Bird Conservation Initiative. "We can monitor migration, breeding and timing patterns in migratory birds. For everything to continue to work in sync, the birds, insects, plants and wildlife must change at the same rate. That doesn't always happen."

Several studies across the nation point to one thing: rising temperatures over the past 40 years have resulted in drastic changes in migration patterns among some species of birds.

The National Oceanic and Atmo-

Migrating birds seek cooler temps as climate changes

spheric Administration (NOAA) records show the average temperatures for January rose more than five degrees Fahrenheit in the continental United States over the past 40 years.

Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count has resulted in one of the largest repositories of bird-migration data in the world. Audubon released a study compiling the "citizen scientists" findings. The data, in conjunction with statistics on rising temperatures, is startling: 305 widespread bird species in North America "have moved dramatically northward - toward colder latitudes - over the past four decades."

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"We were able to look at the trends for almost four decades using our counts and NOAA's figures," said Greg Butcher, director of bird conservation at the National Audubon Society. "If there is no further warming then it's just a fun study; but that's not what the experts say. They say this warming trend will continue."

According to another study from the University of California at Berkeley, changes in precipitation levels also have an impact. The study suggests as warmer and wetter weather has occurred in parts of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the vast majority of birds there have shifted their ranges accordingly.

With predications of increased rainfall in parts of Florida and an increase in the intensity of hurricanes in the next 50 years, our little feathered friends will be forced to adapt faster than a hummingbird

flaps its small, yet mighty wings.

"It's the pace of climate change," Sachs said. "When evolution occurs, species have time to catch up, but the speed at which temperatures are rising and precipitation patterns are changing presents some problems."

Butcher cautions that some birds will go back to breeding grounds too soon. In Canada, as temperatures rise, some birds will stay put, and when the other birds come too soon, precious habitat will be filled with displaced birds.

"Some will adapt," Butcher said. "Species already endangered or on the fringe won't do well and will

suffer. Florida will be particularly vulnerable with its coastal shoreline and huge amount and variety of wintering shorebirds."

Butcher urges individuals to volunteer with local groups working to protect natural areas. He also suggests participating in the annual Christmas Bird Count.

The 110th Christmas Bird Count runs from Dec. 14 to Jan. 5. The Audubon Society's Web site will have specific information by November. Visit www.audubon.org/Bird/cbc and click on "Get Involved." You also can contact your local Audubon chapter for further information on how to get involved. If you are a backyard birder with little experience, a fun way to get involved is through eBird, a Web site devoted to compiling records of bird sightings. Just register at ebird.org and follow the simple instructions for reporting your birding information. You'll be learning about birds and assisting the experts as they address the impacts of climate change.

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