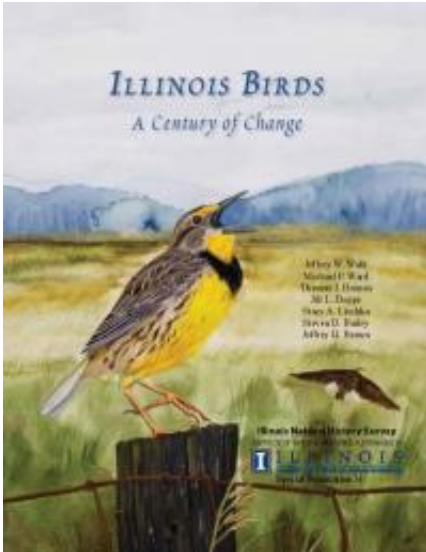


# New book on 100 years of Illinois birds

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This is the cover graphic of "Illinois Birds: A Century of Change." Credit: University of Illinois

A new book, *Illinois Birds: A Century of Change*, literally took 100 years to write. The first comprehensive survey of birds in Illinois was conducted from 1906-1909. It was repeated from 1956-1958 and a technical book was written comparing the two surveys. When the 100-year anniversary of that first survey was approaching, ornithologists Mike Ward, Jeff Walk, Steve Bailey, and Jeff Brawn seized the window of opportunity to do it again and write a book, this time with 100 years of data, lots of pictures, and a broader appeal.

"Many things have changed since 1906. They didn't have bird books or

mp3 players with bird calls on them. They carried guns, and if they could not identify the bird, they likely shot it," said Ward who is an author of the book. "It's also harder today to walk randomly across Illinois as they did then because of private land issues, so it's unlikely that we walked in their exact same footsteps, but we know we were in the same general area."

The researchers also walked down Michigan Avenue. "Most ornithologists avoid [urban areas](#)," Ward said. "But a lot of great conservation happens in the forest preserves in Cook, McHenry and Lake counties. Fifty years from now, most of northern Illinois will probably be one large metropolis and understanding the dynamics of bird populations in urban areas is going to be important for the future management of species in these areas."

Ward said the book is filled with pictures and figures, largely due to the fact that in 1906 the surveyors carried a "state of the art" camera and were told to take a lot of photos. "We have several pictures in the book that were taken in the exact same spot in 1906, 1956 and 2006 so you can see how Illinois has changed and in some cases has not changed. There are areas in central Illinois where the only change in the last 100 years is that now the field is a soybean field instead of a [corn field](#). There are areas in southern Illinois that have gone from ag fields in 1900s to a forest in 1950s, back to ag fields in the 2000s."

What's changed bird-wise in the past century?

Walk said 26 species were found in the 2000s, but not 50 or 100 years ago, including wood ducks, house finches, and collared doves. While only one species has been eliminated from Illinois, there are several species that are declining. "What we were really struck by is that shrubland and savanna birds such as red-headed woodpeckers, brown thrashers, field sparrows, and bobwhites have been declining for about a

century and grassland birds such as pheasants, meadowlarks, dickcissels, and bobolinks have declined dramatically in the past 50 years."

If this downward trajectory continues, field sparrows and bobwhite are going to be in bad shape, said Ward.

"Shrubland birds don't need a lot to survive, just some messy shrubbery. Everything is so manicured today. If we don't mow roadsides until July, that would serve as a good habitat for them."

Ward said that stepping in now and making them a conservation priority will bode well for them in the future. "We know that conservation measures taken early in a species decline are much more effective than waiting until there are only a handful left. This survey, combined with the first two, gives us a really good handle on what the conservation priorities should be in the future," Walk said.

Walk said the 1900s survey gave them a baseline. "In the 1950s they had seen some changes, but they had only two data points. Now we have three and better statistical tools to look at long term trends, so we have a much better grasp on how things have changed over the last 100 years."

With three surveys spanning 100 years, there are huge amounts of data to crunch. Brawn, T.J. Benson, and Jill Deppe provided technical expertise in developing population models using techniques that weren't available 100 or even 50 years ago. "We were able to take the 1900s data, the 1950s data and the modern data and model it to make stronger inferences about what's gone up, what's gone down and what hasn't changed," Brawn said.

Another unique addition from the 2000s survey is personal interviews. "We learned from talking with people that their perceptions of what was happening with the [bird populations](#) were pretty accurate," Walk said.

"They recognized that wild turkeys and Canada geese were increasing and that there were fewer pheasants and quail." Walk said there is definitely a need for education, however. Most people perceived the greatest conservation need with forest birds and didn't recognize that the grassland birds were in far more danger.

The book isn't a compendium of every single bird that occurs in Illinois, but it is a compendium of the major birds that people are most familiar with, Brawn said. The book provided information on how the birds and the landscapes of Illinois have changed. The last chapter of the book offers some predictions of what might happen in the future. "We think species such as hawks are going to be fine because they appear to be adapting to living with humans in urban areas. Currently crows can be seen in urban areas having learned to eat French fries out of garbage cans at fast food restaurants. One hundred years ago, they avoided towns. The species that will thrive in Illinois are likely the ones that can cope with humans," Ward said.

Mike Ward is an assistant professor in the U of I Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES) and a research scientist at the Illinois Natural History Survey. Jeff Walk is the director of science for the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Jeff Brawn is an ornithologist and head of the Department of NRES in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois. Other authors are Thomas Benson, Jill Deppe, Stacy Lischka, and Steven Bailey, with the foreword written by Jean Graber who conducted the 1950s survey with her husband Dick. This survey was funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resource's State Wildlife Grant Program from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

**More information:** Illinois Birds: a Century of Change is a 230-page, full-color book, published by the University of Illinois.

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