

Although most support avian conservation, few recognize current plight of birds

December 16 2021, by Jeff Mulhollem



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The vast majority of Pennsylvanians responding to a recent survey conducted by Penn State researchers said they strongly support bird conservation and indicated they believe future efforts will be needed to

protect avian species.

But there is good news and bad news in those responses to questionnaires that were part of a study to examine [public attitudes](#) toward [bird conservation](#), [government involvement](#) in private lands issues and private forest management, according to researcher Melissa Kreye, assistant professor of forest resource management in the College of Agricultural Sciences.

"We were pleased to see participants' commitment to conservation, but their answers showed little or no recognition of the current situation with [birds](#)," she said. "A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report released earlier this year identified 269 [bird species](#)—many of which can be found in Pennsylvania—that are in trouble. As a leader of the National Audubon Society said recently, we are in a 'bird emergency' now."

The survey, which was developed in consultation with experts from Penn State, Audubon Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, included 40 questions. To help refine those queries, researchers conducted 34 interviews with farmers, loggers and forest landowners in central Pennsylvania, as well as numerous sessions with experts from five private forest conservation organizations and federal agencies. More than 650 people in Pennsylvania completed the survey.

Study participants were asked whether they agreed with statements about: timber harvesting, for example, "Cutting and removing trees is sometimes necessary to provide economic profits to the forest owner"; about landowner assistance, for example, "The government should use financial incentives to help or encourage private owners to change forest management practices"; and about regulation, for example, "The government should be able to regulate the use of forests located on private land to protect public benefits."

Study participants also were asked whether they agreed with statements about birds, such as, "Most common bird populations are in good condition"; about habitat, for example, "Young forest/shrubby habitats are generally available and in good condition"; and about future perceptions, such as, "In 10 years, some common bird populations will be worse off than they are now."

Because forests dominate the landscape in Pennsylvania—and 70% of those forest lands are privately owned—the state was the ideal place to conduct the study, according to Sadikshya Sharma, a doctoral candidate in forest resources, who spearheaded the research.

"As a result, much of the public in Pennsylvania already may be familiar with concepts related to private forest ownership such as timber harvesting, government regulation and landowner- assistance programs," she said. "Forests in the state also are important for many types of local and migratory birds, and forest management is an important strategy for enhancing the habitats needed to support healthy bird populations."

In findings recently published in the journal *Forests*, the researchers report four unique perspectives about birds and important correlations with conservation support on private lands. They noted that respondents with positive views about landowner-assistance programs often had more complex attitudes toward birds and held ethical perspectives about them. The researchers concluded that future public education efforts might cultivate in learners a more robust understanding of bird conservation if they included private [forest](#) land values and culture in their programs.

Sharma said she was struck by respondents' misconceptions about the status of bird populations and worries that the wide misunderstanding of the current plight of birds eventually could limit the public's sense of responsibility and willingness to pay for conservation. Limited knowledge about bird population declines may promote apathy or

disinterest in addressing broader causes of impact on bird populations, she pointed out.

"Most survey respondents believe that birds and habitats today are in good condition and were only concerned about birds in the future," Sharma said. "But recent research has shown that almost 3 million birds have been lost over the last 50 years. Public perceptions about birds and ecosystems seem disconnected from their crisis, with sharply declining species richness, or biodiversity."

More information: Sadikshya Sharma et al, Public Attitudes towards Birds and Private Forest Land Conservation, *Forests* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/f12111525](https://doi.org/10.3390/f12111525)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Although most support avian conservation, few recognize current plight of birds (2021, December 16) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-12-avian-current-plight-birds.html>

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