

Britain has lost 73 million birds over the last 50 years

May 15 2023, by Josh Davis



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Most of the declining species are farmland birds, where a mix of increasingly industrialized agriculture, habitat loss and the climate crisis are having severe impacts.

The dawn chorus is a lot quieter nowadays.

While 50 years ago it might have been normal to hear the rhythmic call of a cuckoo or the gentle trill of a turtle dove, these sounds are becoming ever rarer.

This is because a new study has found that over this time Britain has lost almost a third of all its wild birds. If these declines continue unabated, it is not inconceivable that [future generations](#) will grow up never having heard the call of a cuckoo or a song thrush.

The staggering numbers are the result of research by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), who have looked back to data from the 1970s to try and get a better idea of how many [wild birds](#) lived in Britain at that time, before comparing the stats to more modern surveys.

What they have revealed is a shocking decline of birds. Over the past five decades, Britain has lost close to 30 million house sparrows, 20 million starlings, four million skylarks, two million blackbirds and one million chaffinches.

Professor Juliet Vickery, the BTO's Chief Executive, says, "BTO's wealth of data means we can confidently report this alarming drop in the U.K.'s breeding bird population."



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"In the last 50 years, my own area of Cambridgeshire farmland has experienced some of the highest declines of species in Britain and Ireland. I can no longer hope to hear nightingales singing or enjoy house martins quite literally sharing my home."

"Future generations may well not hear or see song thrushes, cuckoos or kestrels in the area either. We must all do more to reverse these relentless declines and we need to do it urgently."

The BTO have now published their results [on a website](#) that allows anyone in the U.K. to discover which [bird species](#) once lived in your [local area](#), and which ones are doing well, simply by entering your postcode.

Crashing numbers

One of the biggest drivers for the decline of British birds, and biodiversity in general, is thought to be changes in agricultural practices and land-use.

This has resulted in [farmland birds](#) having suffered the worst declines over the past 50 years, which were at their worst in the late 1970s and 1980s. This was largely due to the rapid changes in farmland management during the 1950s and 1960s. But these declines have continued into recent decades.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Recent data released by the U.K. government, for example, has found that 48% of all bird species in the U.K. declined in just the five years between 2015 and 2020. While within this period woodland birds were found to be doing the worst, the government data also showed that, overall, it was the farmland birds that have declined the most.

The BTO data underscores this, showing how there are now 73 million fewer birds in our skies. This number, however, is masked by an increase of some 41 million birds from certain species such as wrens, wood pigeons and blackcaps. The total estimated loss of individual birds is actually an even sharper drop of some 114 million.

While these numbers are extremely concerning, we do at least know what is causing them. The destruction of habitats, be it hedgerows surrounding fields or flower rich meadows, the increase in the use of harmful pesticides and shift in [agricultural practices](#) that has resulted in a lower diversity of plants being grown, have all played a role.

"Presenting these results at the local level, so that anyone can see the changes that have happened on their doorstep simply by entering their postcode, delivers a powerful message that the U.K.'s birds are in trouble, and that we all need to do more," explains Juliet.

The data from the BTO is vital to get a better understanding of the true state of nature in the U.K. We now know what is impacting biodiversity in the U.K., and we know how to fix it.

This story is republished courtesy of Natural History Museum. Read the original story [here](#).

Provided by Natural History Museum

Citation: Britain has lost 73 million birds over the last 50 years (2023, May 15) retrieved 26 April

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-britain-lost-million-birds-years.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.