

Southern Illinois' Birds

Trail of Tears State Forest

Every bird needs something different. Kentucky warblers, for example, love dense ground cover, often choosing to build nests there. Indigo buntings forage in open areas, eating everything from seeds and berries to delectable spiders. Cerulean warblers nest high up in the canopy of trees, picking insects off leaves. And, the nocturnal Eastern Whip-poor-will swoops through open forests to hunt insects. Because of this, scientists who study birds often group them together based on the kinds of habitat they prefer. For Southern Illinois to be a home to each of these birds, then, it needs a diversity of forest habitats.

Managing forests for bird requires a careful review of the scientific literature, as information and knowledge about the needs of birds has expanded a lot in the last decade. We know, for example, that birds prefer large, unbroken blocks of forest. The more expansive the forest, the less parasitism there is from cowbirds. And, for a long time, scientists thought this meant that our forests should be undisturbed. It wasn't until

Oak forests support more birds than those dominated by maple trees.



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bird surveys revealed that birds that depend on more open habitat were on the decline that scientists looked more closely at what was causing it and what could be done.

Scientists now know that birds require a diverse mix of forest communities to thrive. Introducing disturbance into the forest – through prescribed fire or tree removal – are two ways land managers can do that. And, the good news is that removing trees inside a forest block does not create forest edges that could be exploited by cowbirds. Research at Trail of Tears State Forest, after a tree harvest in the 1980s, showed birds that depend on forest gaps increased. Further, birds that depended on forest blocks did not change. The researchers suggested the reason was a “greater structural complexity of vegetation created by selective logging” (Robinson and Robinson, 2001).

New thinking about forest management for birds suggests “the management of disturbance through some combination of flooding, application of fire, or the expression of wildfire, and use of certain types of silviculture have the potential to diversify avian habitats at the local, landscape, and regional scale” (Brawn et. al., 2001).

(Table shows a select listing of birds by group, often called a guild.)

Canopy-nesting guild
Eastern wood-pewee
Yellow-throated vireo
Blue-gray gnatcatcher
Cerulean warbler
Scarlet tanager
Midstory-nesting guild
Acadian flycatcher
Red-eyed vireo
Wood thrush
American redstart
Shrub-nesting guild
Carolina wren
Kentucky warbler
Hooded warbler
Prairie warbler
Eastern towhee
Indigo bunting
Ground-nesting guild
Black-and-white warbler
Worm-eating warbler
Ovenbird
Cavity-nesting guild
Red-bellied woodpecker
Eastern tufted titmouse
White-breasted nuthatch
Avian predators and nest parasites
Blue jay
American crow
Brown-headed cowbird