

Listen to the Music



Prairie Warbler

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Step outside on a still early-summer morning and listen. They're everywhere! Regardless of where you live in Alabama, the one group of wildlife (besides fire ants) you can pretty much count on seeing every single time you are outdoors remains the same ... birds. Over 350 species can be found in our state and almost every type of habitat is utilized by some species of bird. Some species are generalists and use several types of habitats, while others are special-

ists, requiring more refined, often unique habitats. Specialists are sometimes used as indicator species for the presence of a rare habitat type or as a measure of habitat quality. Specialization can often lead to trouble if you are a bird in today's ever-changing landscape. Although many birds are very common, several species have shown decline over the past few decades. Habitat degradation has been suggested as a major contributing factor in this trend.

One habitat type for example, the longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) forest community, ranks among the highest in displaced and degraded ecosystems. Historically, 90 million acres of longleaf forest covered the Southeast; now there are less than three million. This forest system is fire dependent, therefore fire suppression has altered much of what remains from its original state. This change in habitat, in turn, has changed populations of bird species in Alabama and the rest of the

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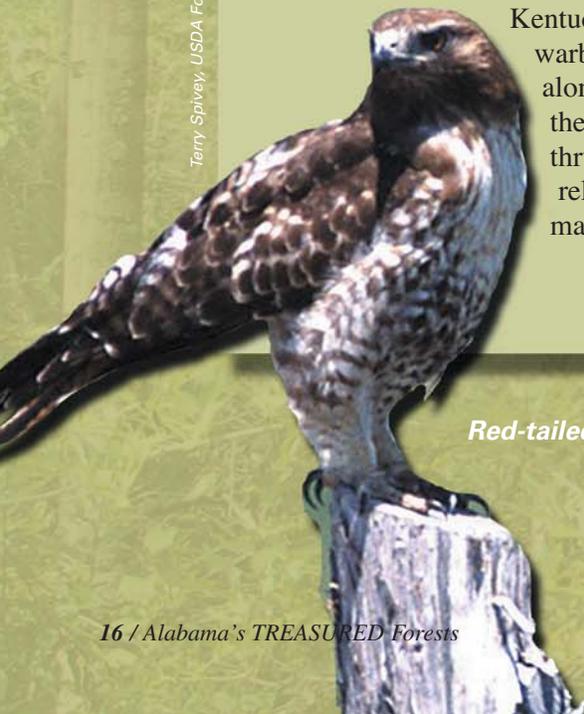
South. Birds associated with open, fire-maintained longleaf are declining in many areas of the Southeast, including prairie warbler, northern bobwhite quail, Bachman's sparrow, brown-headed nuthatch, yellow-breasted chat, and Henslow's sparrow. However, landowners can actively manage for some of these "species of concern," even on relatively small tracts of timberland. Opening pine stands by thinning or by reducing the "midstory," followed by periodic prescribed burning will usually produce the herbaceous vegetation and habitat structure many of these species require. Although longleaf is preferred for this type of management, loblolly and shortleaf stands can be managed in the same way. Growing-season fire is often utilized to restore the character of open pine communities, but care should be taken with growing-season burning if the timber stand has not been exposed to regular fire.

Other bird species require certain types of mature deciduous forest to fulfill their survival needs. Worm-eating, hooded, and

Kentucky warblers, along with the wood thrush, rely on mature

oak-hickory forests. Another wood warbler, the cerulean warbler, is an uncommon summer resident that nests in old-growth riparian hardwoods in northern portions of Alabama. The yellow-billed cuckoo, or "rain crow," is a caterpillar specialist found in mixed mature deciduous forests. These species are also declining across the state due to modification or loss of their habitats. Land management for species such as these typically involves longer rotations – 50 years or greater – of hardwood stands. Some of the species mentioned above would also benefit from the inclusion of some small early-succession patches (gaps) in the forest.

Several other unique habitats exist in Alabama, each with its own group of specialist bird species that have adapted to life there. Generalist bird species, on the other hand, can be found just about anywhere. Examples of generalists are American crow, tufted titmouse, northern cardinal, Carolina chickadee, Carolina wren, red-tailed hawk and even wild turkey. These species typically have a wide range of diets and habitat requirements, and for the most part, can adapt to changing landscapes. It is likely that you will not completely displace these types of species, regardless of the type land management practices



Red-tailed hawk

Redbellied woodpecker



Johnny N. Dell, Retired, Bugwood.org

Carolina wren



Johnny N. Dell, Retired, Bugwood.org

American goldfinch



Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org

Chipping sparrow



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American Woodcock



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you apply. In fact, some of the best advice for general songbird management is to create or maintain many types of habitat on your property. This diversity of vegetation increases edge and appeals to a wide variety of species. Many of these “common” birds are often backyard birds, and can be attracted and viewed by placing feeders and nest structures around your home. Seed feeders, especially during winter, can be very effective in keeping large numbers of birds near your window. In Alabama, expect to see chipping sparrow, northern cardinal, American goldfinch, Carolina chickadee, mourning dove, house finch, purple finch, red-winged blackbird, and red-bellied woodpecker at a winter feeding station.

Humans have been living with birds in this part of the country for around twelve thousand years now. We have always, directly or indirectly, managed for them, even if we were unaware of it. However, the rate of influence we have exerted on wild birds – and other wildlife species – has increased exponentially over time. Native Americans utilized fire to clear forests and manage game. This undoubtedly had some effect on local bird communities, both positive and negative, depending on the species. In the last two hundred years or so however, humans have

imposed drastic effects on some bird populations. The passenger pigeon, for example, was once the most common bird in the country, numbering over five billion. They lived in enormous flocks. During migration these flocks could sometimes be a mile wide and 300 miles long, taking several days to pass overhead. Today, there are no living passenger pigeons. Their extinction resulted, in part, from uncontrolled shooting and trapping during the 1800s, when pigeon meat was commercialized as a cheap food for slaves and the poor. However, habitat loss and disease also played a role. The Carolina parakeet shared the same fate when the last wild birds died out in 1904. Other species that were once found in Alabama, such as Bachman’s warbler and the ivory-billed woodpecker, may already be gone as well.

Through current conservation laws and sound land management practices, we can do our part to help conserve bird species and their habitats, especially those that are unique. 🕊



House finch

Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org



Red-winged blackbird

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Cardinal

James W. Hybart, III



Mourning dove

James W. Hybart, III