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Audubon Society: 201 species near endangered status

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NEW YORK - Bird populations throughout North America are steadily dropping because of lost habitats and other factors, and a quarter of them are approaching the status of endangered species, according to a new National Audubon Society report.

"One in four species that we know across the United States are at risk," Frank Gill, the society's chief ornithologist and senior vice president for science, said yesterday. "This cuts across all groups of birds, from songbirds to water birds to raptors."

The society released a watch list containing 201 species of North American birds whose numbers have dwindled over the past 40 years to the point where they could soon become endangered. The list is a compendium of data compiled from bird-breeding studies conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the annual Christmas bird count conducted by 71 million Audubon volunteers across the country in 2001.

A society analysis of annual studies since 1966 found that loss of habitat, disease, continuing development in forest and wilderness areas, and chemical contamination has taken a toll on many species.

The society found, for example, that the ranks of the forest-dwelling olive-sided flycatcher, which has been common in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties, has declined by 70 percent since the 1960s. These birds, Audubon spokesman John Bianchi said, "need deep forest and that is harder and harder to find. These birds will not go near an area where the sunlight hits the forest floor. Clearing brush for a home will eliminate quite a bit of area from the bird's use."

Other birds common to this region also are declining. Populations of the American woodcock are down 48 percent, the blue cerulean warbler has declined 80 percent, the prairie warbler 44 percent, and the golden-winged warbler has left the state, according to the Audubon survey. The watch list, which lists birds by degree of decline and region, is on the society's Web site at [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org).

There is another factor harming birds like the olive-sided flycatcher, which nest in ground cover and low bushes. They are competing for dwindling floor space with other animals.

"There are issues with the growing deer population," said Jack Robbins, Westchester County's deputy commissioner of parks, recreation and conservation. "There are more deer in smaller areas and they eat the ground cover these birds need."

Efforts to improve habitats for many animals has had mixed results in recent years, Robbins said, as increasing development has collided with efforts to improve wildlife habitats.

"Because of the drop in the pesticide DDT, several birds and animals are coming back to this area," Robbins said. "The coyotes have come back, the wild turkeys have come back, the bobcats are back. That's the positive thing in this region."

But the dwindling amount of undeveloped land means there is competition for what is left. "Canada geese have driven out a lot of the waterfowl that bird lovers want to watch," said Robbins, himself a bird-watcher. "They are more aggressive and accommodate easier to human habitats such as lawns and mowed areas."

Raptors have also enjoyed a resurgence in the area, though one species, the short-eared owl, has lost 80 percent of its population. That owl eats small rodents in grassland areas, and has been hurt by development and rat poisons, Bianchi said.

Many raptors have adapted to encroachment and improvements in the environment. Paul Kupchok, director of the Green Chimneys farm and wildlife center in Patterson, said the number of raptors in this area was "way up" because of the decreased use of pesticides.

"There are more peregrine falcons than ever before with a pair nesting on every bridge over the Hudson River between Manhattan and Albany," Kupchok said. "Raptors are all over the place. Bird feeders in this region have become dining tables for hawks and falcons."

But Eugene Herskovics, a Rockland County park ranger, said that volunteers have been conducting a county "hawk watch" since 1975, and that the overall numbers have steadily dropped.

"In the '70s, the numbers were around 20,000," he said. "But since 1991, for the most part, they have been under 10,000 each year."

Different species of raptors have reacted differently to the pace of development in the Hudson Valley, Herskovics said. Rockland's hawk watch spotted only eight bald eagles in 1986, but last year counted 54.

"The peregrine falcons are doing pretty well here, too," Herskovics said. "They have adapted to the tall buildings. But there are others that can't change as easily with the times.

"When I grew up, there were a lot of farms here and a lot of ringneck pheasant, which were introduced to the area in the 1850s," he said. "But there are only about

three farms left in the county, and they no longer have their required habitat. There are very few pheasant left in the county. There are some species we may lose entirely."

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