

Preface

As we are the editors of this volume, it should go without saying that to us and to all the contributors, as well as to countless people around the world, birds matter. Each of us has a unique story for how we became passionate about birds.

Birds matter in many ways—maybe as many as there are people who care about them. In this volume, we examine how birds matter from the perspective of ecosystem services, those aspects of nature that benefit humans.

Despite the anthropocentric perspective of the ecosystem services documented here, we and this book's contributors know that birds matter in many ways that transcend this utilitarian perspective. Indeed, birds indirectly benefit humans by facilitating other biological processes or products that humans use. We will not lose sight of these other roles of birds, and we hope that other advocates for bird conservation and research do not lose sight of them either.

The contributions that birds and other taxa make to human well-being are profound; they deserve recognition by policy makers and by the public at large. Of course, if the public recognizes the value of birds and votes accordingly, policy makers will do so as well.

The need to inform the public about the contributions of birds to ecosystem services became abundantly clear when one of us (CJW) gave a public presentation on the subject in a rural area southwest of Chicago dominated by soy and corn agriculture. When we presented the results of a Dutch study showing that bird predation on apple-damaging insects increased the apple yield by 66%, two farmers in the audience asked: "Why isn't this information public?"

Of course the information is available to the public, but those of us who are most privy to it do a bad job of getting it out beyond the community of professionals. Hence, we designed this book to convey the current science in a way that an educated nonscientist could relate to and understand. For helping us realize such a book, we are grateful to the University of Chicago Press, which has supported us since the book's conception in 2007, and to our dedicated colleagues who have contributed chapters. We also thank in particular Christopher Chung and Evan White, both of whom helped steer the book through the review and publication process at the Press.

Despite the importance of birds to the functioning of ecosystems and their provision of ecosystem services to people, we continue to lose bird species, more of which are at great risk of extinction than ever. The most striking examples of the ecological consequences are the vultures of South Asia, particularly India. As a result of poisoning with the veterinary drug diclofenac, vulture populations in India crashed 100- to 1,000-fold in the last decade of the 20th century. Despised by many people, vultures provide critical sanitary services in India, and indeed around much of the world. The decline of vultures, and thus the decline of their sanitary services, in South Asia has led to irruptions of rats and feral dogs, many of which carry rabies, and rabies deaths in India have thus increased. Two economists have calculated that the disappearance of vultures has led to approximately 48,000 additional human deaths due to rabies, and has carried an economic cost of \$34 billion (from 1992 to 2006). Furthermore, adherents of the Parsi religious sect have experienced a spiritual crisis because they can no longer leave their dead to the vultures in their traditional "sky burial"; they now have changed their method of disposing the bodies of their loved ones. The fact that vultures are by far the most threatened functional group of birds is an unfortunate but telling indication of how little humanity values birds' crucial ecosystem services.

We hope that in covering the gamut of birds' ecosystem functions and services, from pollination to ecosystem engineering, this book provides an informative and entertaining overview of birds' crucial and fascinating contributions to the functioning of our planet and to the well-being of humanity. Several chapters have extended tables and additional online content that can be viewed at www.press.uchicago.edu/sites/whybirdsmatter/.

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