



Naturalist

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Autumn: Tis the Season for Migration

For millennia, birds have influenced cultures around the world in art, dance, food, and clothing. Often they were taken for granted. Today, an increasing number of Chicagoans realize we all have a responsibility to maintain the habitats that provide food and shelter for birds. During fall and spring, the lakefront becomes an aerial pathway for migrating birds. Chicago parks with nature areas offer different habitats along the way. Wetlands, lagoons, woods, grasslands, oak savannas, and the lake provide various amenities to the diverse bird species that visit. A few bird safe havens along Lake Michigan include the Magic Hedge at Montrose Point, Northerly Island, and Rainbow Beach & Park.



Water fowl such as ducks, grebes, and coots stay for the entire winter, while many warblers and sparrows may just be passing through Chicago. The beautiful inner lagoons of Washington, Douglas and Garfield parks, among others, provide quiet inland shelter for many over-wintering birds. Jackson Park's Wooded Island is particularly important as it provides an area for both forest and water loving birds.

In both autumn and spring, Chicago becomes a hotspot for migrating birds. In fact, this flyway is so important that the City of Chicago started the "Lights Out" program. Because many birds become disoriented during their night migration flights, skyscrapers turn down their lights, saving thousands of birds from window and building collisions.

So why do birds migrate? For most, it's a matter of survival. Others, however, are able to survive in northern climates. Trees, shrubs, and native plants provide berries, seeds, grubs and nuts during the winter months, which become the food source of birds who do not migrate. Birds need to constantly eat in order to stay warm. The next time someone says "You eat like a bird," they really mean you eat all the time!

While birds are away on migration, their special habitat in a distant forest, marsh, prairie, or pond may have been altered or even destroyed. Increasing pressure from people demanding natural resources makes it difficult to protect land for birds. When we buy products such as coffee, hot chocolate or paper that come from important bird habitat areas, be aware of the impact these products have on birds and on the environment as a whole. Buying wood products made with Forest Stewardship Council certified wood, or enjoying shade-grown coffee are just two ways to help save critical bird habitat.

Volunteering to help with habitat restoration in your local park is a wonderful way to learn about birds and help ensure their habitat will be there for years to come.

It's never too early or too late to start enjoying birds. Bird field guides and binoculars may be obtained from Northerly Island and North Park Village Nature Center. Local libraries are great resources for bird information as well. If you keep a bird feeder filled all winter, birds will flock to you. Or visit a local park where the urban forest acts like a bird "magnet." Wherever you go, have fun enjoying birds in their city habitats.

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