

What would happen if the birds of North America disappear?

It is hard to even imagine the consequences; however, a review of what happened in China could be instructive:

In 1958 Mao Zedong declared sparrows an enemy of the state. He had decided that the birds were the reason for the failure of his agricultural programs and, hence, farmers were given incentives to kill all they could find.

Amazingly, they succeeded. When tens of millions of peasants go to work, billions of birds can be killed in a season. And not just sparrows: Photographs in history books show twenty-foot high stacks of birds of many species—and a lot of happy government officials.

But nature abhors a vacuum.

The photographs from the next year show a genuine plague of locusts. Without their natural predators, grasshoppers were able to reproduce to the point they blotted out the sky and blanketed the fields from one end of China to the other. (Estimates are that at least thirty million people died in the immediate famine and the resulting environmental and societal consequences are too disturbing even to describe here.)

Are we saying there will be a famine if the birds of North America disappear? No, certainly not. We live in an advanced technological society with many agricultural companies that can follow the spirit of DuPont's "better living through chemistry." Of course, few Americans would welcome the use of more pesticides.

Which could be a problem. One of the consequences of ecological imbalances is great population growth for some lucky species. Rabbits live a safe life in Chicago parks, regularly eating their way through hundreds of thousands of dollars of vegetation. The forest preserves in some areas are overrun by deer whose only predator is a speeding car. And everyone is certainly familiar with the problems created by the over-population of Canada Geese.

Birds eat bugs.

Thousands every day of insects, worms, lice, beetles, moths, weevils..... the list is almost endless. Purple Martins eat thousands of mosquitoes every day, for example. Evening Grosbeaks will eat fifty thousand caterpillars in a summer.

Birds are our chief ally in keeping bugs in check. Most insects have a beneficial role in nature too, but, without predators, they multiply at such a rapid rate that they will devour grass, leaves and all other plant life.

The role of birds in the cycle of life is simply irreplaceable.