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Long-term Changes in Connecticut's Tidal Marshes

This 1974 view of Upper Island in Old Lyme shows a mixture of salt meadow and native narrow-leaved cattails.

Connecticut's tidal marshes are varied natural habitats that provide homes to some of the state's rarest and least known bird species. Species like the Black Rail, King Rail and Least Bittern are largely associated with these environments.

Tidal marshes are dominated by salt meadow grasses where water is salty. As water become less saline in upper parts of estuaries, salt grasses give way to brackish cattail communities, which in turn are replaced by a variety of freshwater plant associations. Plant species like river bulrush,

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TIDAL MARSHES -CONTINUED

By 1987, the same location on Upper Island, Old Lyme had changed from cattails to invasive, non-native common reeds.

"In some instances, native plant species of tidal marshes have been replaced by alien ones."

water horsetail, calamus, bullhead lily and pickerelweed are common in freshwater areas.

In some instances, native plants of tidal marshes have been replaced by alien ones. Most notably, common reeds are replacing native cattails in brackish marshes. Although Connecticut possessed a native reed prehistorically, the present aggressive population originated in Eurasia.

Although plants like this one have significantly altered native plant communities, their effects on birds are more equivocal. For example, the Least Bittern appears to be equally at home in cattails and reeds. In addition, species like ducks and geese build their nests among reeds, as the dense growth afford protective cover.

Another alien plant that has invaded freshwater tidal marshes is the purple loosestrife. Although this species can displace native marsh plants, its woody overwintering stems provide a sturdy nesting substrate for bird species like the Red-winged Blackbird and Common Yellowthroat. Birds also eat and spread its seeds.

The common reed has proven difficult to control, and doing so requires removal of its roots to eliminate it. In the case of loosestrife, however, a predatory beetle can be used to control its spread. In areas colonized by these beetles, loosestrife has been all but eliminated.

Endangered Island Birds

The Micronesian Megapode is a rather primitive bird that is endangered within its limited Pacific island range.

"Species like these that have evolved in isolation tend to be vulnerable to a host of environmental insults."

We continue our work to develop life history accounts for bird species from tropical islands. Aside from periodic population surveys, most species that live on these islands remain poorly known to science. Many live on remote, uninhabited islands that are difficult to access and, thus, are rarely studied by scientists.

A number of these species are also believed to be endangered with extinction. Species like these that have evolved in isolation tend to be vulnerable to a host of environmental insults. Introduced disease, predators, insects, plants, habitat alteration and human hunting can have catastrophic consequences for their populations.

The recent introduction of an alien gall wasp to the Mariana Islands of the western tropical Pacific is a case in point. Where it has become established, it has virtually eliminated a native species of flame tree from forests. The flowers of this tree provided a principal winter food for a nectar-feeding bird, the Micronesian Myzomela. In the case of the Micronesian Megapode (illustrated above), human hunting and egg collecting has been implicated in the species' disappearance

ISLAND BIRDS
-CONTINUED

Forest bird surveys on uninhabited Aguiguan produced documentation of the only viable Micronesian Megapode population in the southern Mariana Islands.

from islands with human populations.

To date, we have produced life history studies on the Micronesian Myzomela, Micronesian Rufous Fantail, Golden White-eye, Bridled White-eye, Rota White-eye, Mariana Crow and Saipan Reed Warbler. A number of additional life histories are planned. In many instances, we are providing new data on these species, so our accounts provide important tools for conservationists to use in developing survival strategies for these species.

Efforts are now underway to translocate individuals of vulnerable populations to uninhabited and rarely visited islands where they will be more secure. To date, species like the Guam Rail, Guam Kingfisher, Mariana Fruit Dove, Bridled White-eye, Golden White-eye and Micronesian Rufous Fantail have been translocated. A number of these have become successfully established and are prospering in their new homes.

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Garden Birds

This fledgling Chipping Sparrow hatched from a nest in an ornamental northern white-cedar.

Gardens that are rich in fruiting shrubs, conifers and herbaceous flowering plants provide valuable habitats for a variety of Connecticut's native birds. Flowers, nectar, fruits and seeds provide food for many species, and particularly conifers offer secure nesting cover.

One of the keys to developing a bird-friendly garden involves choosing plantings that yield consistent sources of food. Gardens that produce flowers and fruit from spring through fall offer the most hospitable environments. In addition, plants that produce seeds and persistent fruits extend the value of the garden into winter.

Woody plants such as the various species of shadbush, viburnum, holly, azalea, rhododendron, dogwood, juniper, pine, spruce, fir and white-cedar are valued by birds. Species within these groups vary in their season of flowering, fruiting and seed production, so by carefully choosing varieties, gardens can have not only multi-season attractiveness but also benefits for birds.

Bird species typically attracted to well-planned gardens include the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Gray Catbird, Cedar Waxwing, American Robin, Chipping Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Eastern Phoebe, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole and Orchard Oriole.

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The Eastern Phoebe is a regular inhabitant of well-developed gardens.

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