

How Planning for Birds Makes Our Communities and Economies Healthier

A new book from biophilic design advocate and sustainability expert Tim Beatley takes a global tour of cities

reinventing the status quo to support birdlife.



The pandemic has created a greater interest in reconnecting with nature, especially birds. Photo by Andi Edwards/iStock/Getty Images Plus.

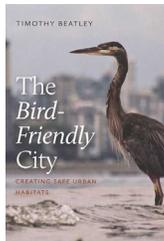
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By LINDSAY R. NIEMAN

The populations of about 40 percent of the world's 11,000 bird species are in decline. That's according to BirdLife International's 2018 State of the World's Birds report, which points to habitat loss, cat predation, bird-building strikes, and climate change as the culprits.

"While it can be difficult to motivate citizens to take action on behalf of the larger planet, birds offer the possibility that tangible steps can be taken that make a difference," writes Tim Beatley, ([/planning/2018/dec/evergreen/](https://planning.org/planning/2018/dec/evergreen/)) author and Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, where he's taught for more than 30 years. "And there are many things cities and city planners can do."



Beatley's latest book, [The Bird-Friendly City: Creating Safe Urban Habitats](https://islandpress.org/books/bird-friendly-city) (<https://islandpress.org/books/bird-friendly-city>) (Island Press, 2020), digs into that charge, taking a global tour of cities reinventing the status quo with birds in mind. Planning caught up with him to discuss the challenges — and solutions — ahead, racial and gender diversity issues in birding, and how planning for our feathered friends helps humans, too. The interview has been edited for length and clarity

PLANNING: We've all spent more time close to home this past year. Do you think that's impacted our appreciation of local avian life?

BEATLEY: It definitely has. For many of us, there's been a remarkable rediscovery of nature and a reconnection with the natural world that has been calming and therapeutic. Birds especially have been a saving grace, a soothing balm, a way to reduce the large amount of stress and anxiety in our pandemic lives.

There's plenty of evidence that we're watching and listening more to birds than we were a year ago. Visits to bird conservation websites and downloads of bird identification apps, for example, have gone up. We're purchasing (many of us for the first time) bird feeders and bird seed. An informal poll we conducted showed that the vast majority of participants in a recent webinar had been engaging in a variety of bird-related activities, including taking bird-watching walks in their neighborhoods.

It's hard to overstate the importance of birds during these difficult times. They animate the spaces around us in cities, they delight and surprise us, they deliver remarkable moments of joy and delight, and they lift us emotionally.

PLANNING: How can protecting birds help humans?

BEATLEY: I'm frequently saying that what's good for birds will be good for humans. A flourishing city — indeed a flourishing life — is one animated by abundant bird life. Planting more trees, for example, benefits birds, but it also mitigates the impacts of extreme heat.

The Japanese concept of [forest bathing](https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/) (<https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/>), *shinrin-yoku*, which I like very much, values the immersive nature experiences. Watching and listening to birds is very much like this, and it often feels as if I'm bathing in a sea of birdsong. (Birdsong bathing may be what we should call it!) I feel immediately better when I hear it, and it instantly helps to shift my perspective away from whatever rumination or self-absorbed thoughts I might be having.

We know listening to birds helps calm us, reduces stress, and enhances happiness. The mental health benefits alone suggest that there are few things cities could do that would deliver a greater return. But a bird-friendly city isn't just one that sees birds as a kind of green pill; it instead understands that they are sentient creatures with intrinsic value and inherent worth. We are duty bound, for example, to reduce the harm and suffering birds experience when they strike windows and building facades — near a billion bird deaths a year in the U.S. alone, some conservative estimates suggest.



One of the author's favorite projects, The Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Singapore, uses nature to support healing and prominently displays a list of the bird species sited on the grounds. Photo by DerekTeo/Shutterstock.com.

PLANNING: How can planners and other community leaders protect birds, especially during spring and fall migrations?

BEATLEY: An important step is to adopt mandatory bird-safe design standards that require new buildings to utilize fritted glass and bird-safe window treatments. We see these requirements in [Toronto](https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/8d1c-Bird-Friendly-Best-Practices-Glass.pdf) (<https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/8d1c-Bird-Friendly-Best-Practices-Glass.pdf>), [San Francisco](https://sfplanning.org/standards-bird-safebuildings) (<https://sfplanning.org/standards-bird-safebuildings>), and most recently [New York City](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-13/nyc-is-making-its-buildingsbird-friendly) (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-13/nyc-is-making-its-buildingsbird-friendly>). The Toronto Green Standard requires a density pattern of 5 cm by 5 cm (or about 2 inches by 2 inches), which has been shown effective in preventing bird strikes. We should aspire to a similar standard in every city.

Planners can address many other threats birds face. Becoming champions for lights-out campaigns is crucial during peak periods of migration, for example. More than 30 cities now run such programs. Dark-sky lighting ordinances and efforts to curtail use of pesticides and herbicides also do much to help birds and other wildlife.

But we need to go beyond simply reducing threats. We need to proactively plan with birds in mind and work to protect and expand habitats for birds in and around cities. A casual review of comprehensive plans finds little mention of birds and birdlife. Planners should

work to account for birds and other wildlife in their plans as an essential element in creating our vibrant future cities. Vancouver, British Columbia, has a stand-alone bird strategy (<https://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/vancouver-birdstrategy.aspx>), for example, as well as a standing bird advisory committee. The strategy lays out its vision as a bird-friendly city and sets out specific actions and recommendations for how to move towards that vision.

Land-use planning should do a better job with ecological connectivity, too. Some cities, like Edmonton in Canada, have given great emphasis to ecological connectivity and have been utilizing circuit theory to understand where physical barriers and ecological disconnects prevent birds (and other animals) from easily moving through the city. This is really part and parcel of the larger vision of a multispecies city: We should want to live in places where we share space and actively work to coexist with many other species.

PLANNING: Do less urban areas have room for improvement, too?

BEATLEY: Yes, suburbs also offer opportunities to reduce dangers for birds and positively enhance habitats. A high percentage of birds are killed striking windows in lower-density residential areas, which can be prevented by cost-effective window treatments and off-the-shelf commercial products (<https://www.biophiliccities.org/events/2020/11/10/birdfriendlycity>), from parachords that hang down over windows to bird-friendly tape to film treatments.

A larger challenge is converting turfgrass suburban lawns into bird-supportive gardens with native species. Such a change would provide standalone benefits like lower water and energy consumption, of course, but it would also benefit birds. As University of Delaware ecologist Doug Tallamy (<https://www.udel.edu/faculty-staff/experts/douglas-tallamy/>) argues, if we converted just half our lawns, that would mean 20 million acres of bird habitat, amounting to what he calls a "homegrown national park." Planners can help overcome these obstacles.

A recent example is Toronto's grass and weeds bylaw (<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/public-notices-bylaws/bylawenforcement/long-grass-weeds/#:~:text=The%20bylaw%20requires%20that%20property,including%20wildflowers%2C%20shrubs%20and%20perennials.>), which essentially makes a native garden illegal (though there is a mechanism for applying for an exemption). Nina-Marie Lister (<https://www.ryerson.ca/school-of-urban-and-regional-planning/about/people/faculty/nina-marie-lister/>), a planning professor at Ryerson University who converted her yard to a native garden, found to be in violation, has ignited a conversation in Toronto about the bylaw and mounted a challenge to the "lawn order" (as one newspaper headline cleverly put it). Indeed, given the many ecological services and benefits provided by such native gardens, cities should not prohibit or discourage them; instead, we should actively support and financially subsidize them.

Ultimately, one of the things I'd like to see is the development and use of better metrics for judging the success of the places we live, and here I offer birds and birdsong as candidates. For me, the quality and abundance of birdsong represent an excellent metric for judging how well we are planning our communities. We need to do everything we can to make our cities biophilic, and this can happen in many ways: daylighting streams and rewilding spaces, more rooftop meadows and living walls, and of course more urban trees and forests. One of the stories in the book is of a remarkable rewilding project in Perth, Western Australia, where a sterile, chlorinated water feature has been converted into native biodiverse wetland (<https://www.biophiliccities.org/perth-urban-wetlandfilm>), better for both birds and people.

PLANNING: People might be surprised that providing habitats for birds offers economic benefits. What have you learned?

BEATLEY: Well, we know that the market system responds positively to the presence of birds, and we have evidence from some cities that birds and birdsong are even mentioned in real estate advertisements. In Wellington, New Zealand, there is Zealandia, a wild sanctuary in

the middle of the city where they have erected a predator-proof fence to allow the native species of birds to rebound (their populations have been decimated by many nonnative species like weasels, rats, and, of course, domestic cats). [A Victoria University study \(http://wellington.scoop.co.nz/?p=86358\)](http://wellington.scoop.co.nz/?p=86358) of real estate listings, including homes for sale and rental apartments, found reference to birds popping up quite a lot, especially near the sanctuary. Another study by researchers at Texas A&M found a positive relationship between bird diversity and abundance and home prices — again, not surprising, though for these researchers, birds were seen as a proxy for a range of underlying ecological conditions that support birds.

There's also considerable evidence from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studies showing the billions of dollars in expenditures resulting from nature- and bird-tourism, though the pandemic has likely put a dent in that. But there are birding festivals all around the country, and while many have gone online, they will undoubtedly return.



While a graduate student in aviation conservation at Georgia Southern University, [Corina Newsome \(https://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2020/its-time-build-truly-inclusive-outdoors\)](https://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2020/its-time-build-truly-inclusive-outdoors) co-organized the first Black Birders Week, a social media campaign that highlights Black people who bird. This year's event, #BlackBirdersWeek, was held May 30 to June 4. Photo by Katherine Arntzen, Georgia Southern University.

PLANNING: In your book, you mention that birders up to now have been mostly older, affluent white people, and you reference what [J. Drew Lanham \(https://www.clemson.edu/cafls/faculty_staff/profiles/lanhamj\)](https://www.clemson.edu/cafls/faculty_staff/profiles/lanhamj), a Black birder, scientist, and professor, has said about what "[birding while Black \(https://lithub.com/birding-while-black/\)](https://lithub.com/birding-while-black/)" is like. How can the community of birders better support more racial, gender, and age diversity?

BEATLEY: This is a serious challenge in the birding world. Lately I've been presenting (via Zoom!) to numerous bird groups and bird clubs around the country. They are a remarkably passionate lot, and very actively working in their communities on behalf of birds, but I'm often struck by the lack of diversity I see.

Birding and bird watching must work to become much more inclusive and diverse. It begins with intentional efforts and opening up leadership to a more diverse membership. Bird groups like Audubon appear to understand this and are beginning to confront some of their racist past (<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2020/birding-and-conservation-groups-are-beginning>)s (John James Audubon owned enslaved people, for example, and held white supremacist views (<https://www.audubon.org/news/the-myth-johnjames-audubon>)).

Who gets to enjoy birds is an important question. When a white woman threatened (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/nyregion/central-park-amy-cooper-christian-racism.html>) to call the police on Black birder Christian Cooper (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/06/23/christian-cooper-central-park-birder-comics/>) in Central Park last year, it was shocking for many. For birders of color, however, it was in many ways business as usual. Cooper's experience highlighted to everyone how dangerous and unwelcoming many public spaces can be to Black birders and other people of color.

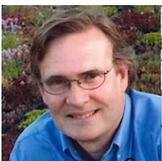
I watched and was heartened by the events of Black Birders Week (<https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2020/06/i-cant-even-enjoyblackbirdersweek-organizer-shares-her-struggles-black-scientist>) that followed, but so much more needs to be done. An essential step is to recognize the historic problem of systemic racism and segregated land use patterns that still bedevil American cities. The neighborhoods with high tree canopies and larger, more accessible parks are more likely to provide more opportunities to watch and listen to birds. Research shows that neighborhoods with lower levels of tree canopy, and thus fewer opportunities to experience birds, track closely with redlining maps ([/blog/9212209/urban-heat-management-and-the-legacy-of-redlining/](https://www.planning.org/planning/2020/summer/urban-heat-management-and-the-legacy-of-redlining/)). We must address these deeper, systemic causes of unjust and unequal patterns of access to nature.

PLANNING: How are some communities working to address those issues? How can others get started?

BEATLEY: In Richmond, Virginia, Mayor Levar Stoney is prioritizing access to parks and nature for communities with high concentrations of people of color, and a new comprehensive plan sets minimum tree canopy targets with a focus on those neighborhoods — which, by the way, are also neighborhoods where the urban heat index is much higher ([/planning/2020/aug/the-heat-is-on/](https://www.planning.org/planning/2020/aug/the-heat-is-on/)). Last fall, Stoney also announced the creation of five new parks by identifying and utilizing land already owned by the city.

Nature is a birthright and everyone deserves to experience it, wherever you live. We need to make sure we design bird-friendly cities that take a whole-of-life approach. That means creatively working birding into our schools. Every school should be viewed as a bird sanctuary and habitat to introduce kids to the delight of listening to and watching birds at an early age. We should also find ways (which won't be hard to do) to include birds in STEM education.

Gender diversity and LGBTQ+ inclusion in birding are important goals, too. Especially troubling are the very real threats and dangers to women in public spaces today (the disappearance of Sarah Everard in the U.K. has given voice recently to many of these concerns), depriving half our population of the benefits and enjoyment of nature and bird watching. Tackling the underlying causes of violence against women is paramount.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Timothy Beatley

Timothy Beatley (<http://tim.greenurbanvision.com/about/>) is the Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, where he has taught for more than 30 years. He wrote Planning's "Ever Green"

column for 10 years and is the author or co-author of more than 15 books, including his latest, *The Bird-Friendly City*:

Lindsay Nieman is an associate editor of Planning.

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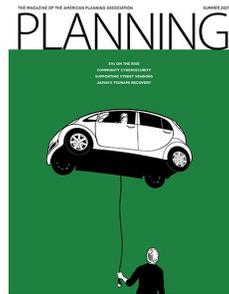


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