

Human Interaction With Birds Is Complicated

The Wired Word for the Week of April 5, 2026

In the News

With the coming of spring, birdwatchers have been gathering in the predawn hours at the 6,300-acre Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area in Pennsylvania to see thousands of migrating snow geese lift off into the sky en route to their summer breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic and western Greenland up north. Pennsylvania Game Commission environmental education specialist Payton Miller called it "a raucous bird tornado."

Adrian Binns, a safari guide from Paoli, Pennsylvania, said he comes for "the whole enjoyment of seeing something you don't see every day."

The Pennsylvania Game Commission says about 100,000 snow geese were roosting there on the busiest day last year, about half the single-day record of about 200,000 on February 21, 2018. The greater snow geese population has grown from about 3,000 in the early 1900s to an estimated million now, according to Springer Nature.

Among the 250 other bird species drawn to the reservoir are about 10 million lesser snow geese, about 5,000 tundra swans, and assorted bald eagles, northern harriers, ospreys and owls.

Officials in the United States and Canada tasked with wildlife management face the challenge of balancing the interests of farmers dealing with crop damage, poultry producers dealing with losses caused by avian flu viruses spread by wild birds, hunters who object to regulations they may deem as onerous, environmentalists concerned about loss of habitat or overgrazing as the geese population has grown, animal rights activists seeking to protect waterfowl, and birdwatchers who delight in observing the impressive flocks of migratory birds.

In the forests of southeastern Australia, black-and-yellow regent honeyeater songbirds were once plentiful, but due to humans clearing much of their habitat, the species is now critically endangered, with an estimated 250 wild birds remaining. Scientists are hoping to mitigate or even reverse this trend, through a program in which older wild honeyeaters are captured and temporarily placed near younger males bred in zoos, to teach them the distinctive melodic warble they will need to use to defend territory and attract mates when they are released into the wild.

The scientists hope that the vocal tutoring program might help boost reproductive rates in the wild in a way that playing recordings of honeyeater song has not. According to Daniel Appleby, a conservation biologist at Australian National University and an author of the study, live mentors produced such positive results that the next generation were able to become tutors themselves.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Raucous Bird Tornado Touches Down as Snow Geese Make Annual Flight to Arctic. AP News

How to Bring a Bird's Song Back From the Edge of Extinction. The New York Times

Applying the News Story

Birds and other animals are featured in many passages of the Bible, from Genesis (Genesis 1:20-22, 27-31) through Revelation (Revelation 4:6-8). In some texts, animal traits are mentioned to express or reflect something of the nature and behavior of God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit: so we read of the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God, for example.

The psalmist tells those who live in the shelter of the Most High that God will cover them with his pinions (feathers) and that they will find refuge under his wings (Psalm 91:1-4). At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descends "like a dove" upon him (Matthew 3:16). And as Jesus approached Jerusalem on his way to the cross, he compares himself to a hen who "gathers her brood under her wings" (Matthew 23:37). While we know that God is Spirit (John 4:24) and doesn't have the limitations of physicality, these metaphors can help us understand something about how God relates to us and how God desires us to live.

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you," Job says (Job 12:7-8). Use the news to discuss what we can learn about God through the creatures with whom we share the planet.

The Big Questions

1. What role, if any, have animals played in your faith journey?
2. What can we learn from animals that might apply to mentoring or making disciples?
3. Have you ever participated in any form of animal rescue? What might motivate someone to engage in such an effort?
4. What factors influence decisions humans make regarding wildlife management?
5. What Scriptures might apply to how we should interact with wild and domestic animals?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 9:9-13 [God said to Noah and his sons,] "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the

waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." (For context, read Genesis 9:1-17.)

Because of the great wickedness of humans, and "that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually," God was deeply grieved and determined to destroy everything he had made by a great flood. But God spared Noah and his family, instructing him to build an ark, into which he was to bring animals and birds of every kind, to keep them alive, along with food to sustain them until the waters subsided (Genesis 6:5-8, 17-21; Genesis 7:1-3). Noah did as he was commanded, and months later, after the rain stopped and the waters receded, he opened a window and sent out a raven, and then a dove, to gauge whether the land had dried sufficiently so that they could safely exit the ark (Genesis 8:1-12).

At another time in Israel's history, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of how the land mourned and the grass of every field withered, and the animals and the birds were swept away "for the wickedness of those who live in it" (Jeremiah 12:4).

In our own time, the forces of war have interrupted air travel in the Middle East, causing people to struggle to bring their pets out of danger. Recently, in a kind of modern "ark," a special evacuation flight from the United Arab Emirates carried 101 Greeks and 45 pets to Athens.

Danai Koukoulomati was one of those on board who had been unable to find an airline willing to accept animals in the cabin or in the cargo hold. She said her cat Muay Thai was calmer than she was about noisy explosions as the conflict escalated. There was no way she was going to leave him behind, she said. "To me, my pet, my cat is my family."

"Our pets are not luggage," agreed Nikos Chrysakis, the Greek Interior Ministry's Special Secretary for the Protection of Companion Animals.

Questions: How does human warfare impact animal habitat, land, water and air upon which they rely? How can we calculate the cost of military action on the environment? While some are able to escape areas of conflict, how many others (both human and other species) are left behind to face an uncertain future? How might efforts to rescue animals, whether domestic or wild, be a kind of prayer and reason for hope?

Deuteronomy 22:6-7 If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. Let the mother go, taking only the young for yourself, in order that it may go well with you and you may live long. (No context needed.)

This text may strike those of us who live in an urban environment as obscure and antiquated, but if we live in a culture that relies on hunting and gathering to sustain us, this instruction might make more sense. A family that lives close to the edge of hunger out in the wild might enjoy feasting on a wild partridge, but only for a single meal.

Questions: Why not take a mother bird, along with the chicks and the eggs? What might a family do with fledglings and eggs? Why does this command come with a promise "that it may go well with you and you may live long"? How might this passage guide our thinking about how to manage domestic animals and wildlife?

John 12:12-15 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord -- the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (For context, read John 12:9-19.)

This passage describes the event we may know as the Triumphal Entry, or the Palm Sunday Parade that occurred a few days before Jesus' arrest, trial and execution. It's notable for several reasons: Matthew specifies that this event was foretold through the prophet (Matthew 21:4-5; Zechariah 9:9). Luke informs the reader that the donkey's colt upon which Jesus sat had never been ridden before (Luke 19:30), which would seem to indicate that Jesus had a particular affinity for animals, that he might have been called "a donkey whisperer" of sorts. Watching Jesus mount a colt that had never been "broken" by a rider or a trainer must have impressed the crowd.

TWW team member Bill Tammeus wrote that rather than riding into town on a big stallion with tons of armed soldiers around him, Jesus made fun of royalty by showing up on a donkey while poor people waved palm leaves. "I consider that divine black comedy," Tammeus remarked.

TWW team member Stan Purdum concurred: "Yes, a comedy. John Dominic Crossan posits that as Passover approached, Jesus came to Jerusalem intentionally 'to make twin demonstrations, first against Roman imperial control over the City of Peace and, second, against Roman imperial control over the Temple of God. In other words, put personally, against the (sub)governor Pilate and the high-priest Caiaphas.'

"As Crossan explains it," Purdum continued, "Jesus intended his very public entry into Jerusalem on the donkey as not only criticism of Roman power but a lampoon of it. Because of the people coming to Jerusalem from all over for the Passover, Pilate would have come to the city bringing extra troops from his base in Caesarea. Contrast Pilate on his stallion with Jesus on a nursing donkey mare with her baby beside her, and you see the intended message: 'Peace on earth, yes, but not peace by Rome's violent victory, rather peace by God's non-violent justice,' Crossan says."

Questions: What insight does this incident give you about Jesus' attitude toward animals? What can we learn from this event about the role of various animals in salvation history? How might that apply to the role of humans from various backgrounds?

Luke 12:22-26 He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?" (For context, read Luke 12:22-34.)

Jesus spoke these words in response to a man who wanted Jesus to instruct his brother to split his inheritance with him (Luke 12:13-21). It's a mistake, Jesus taught, to build your life on the pursuit of an abundance of material goods rather than on what God values. So seek God's kingdom, and trust God for the rest!

Those listening might have associated his words with the psalm where it is written that God "gives to the animals their food and to the young ravens when they cry" (Psalm 147:9), or with the story of the prophet Elijah, who was fed by ravens during a famine (1 Kings 17:1-6).

Questions: What can we learn from the ravens in these passages? How can we model our own daily practices after their example?

For Further Discussion

1. Comment on this, from artist Claude Monet: "I would like to paint the way a bird sings."
2. Watch and react to "Birds," by Jesse Welles (Video 2:04).
3. Reflect on this, from TWW team member Mary Sells: "The beauty of God's creation is filled with endless wonders. It is also filled with intelligent design, like seasons of growing, animal and bird migrations, etc. Who hasn't looked at any murmuration in the skies, when flocks swirl and swoop in gorgeous patterns of flight, seen the miracle of crocuses pushing up through the hard winter earth, marveled at the endless variety of flora and fauna that grow around the world, or been stunned by deserts that can be ravishing in their beauty, and not been gobsmacked? Where do you see God's handiwork in our natural world? Ecclesiastes tells us there is a purpose to everything. Could beauty be a purpose in itself, or simply a bonus for God's delight or for our eyes?"
4. In the article, How the 'No Kill' Movement Betrays Its Name, author Jonathan Franzen wrote: "Our sympathy for animals has created a situation that's terrible for animals." In the search for ethical and kind treatment of one species (cats), he suggests that we may end up treating other species (birds) unethically and cruelly, and ultimately, he says, "Both cats and nature pay the price." Reflecting on his outing with two women who trapped feral cats in order to neuter them before returning them to the environment where they were found, Franzen remarked, "As a birder, I was interested in cats because they kill staggering numbers of birds in the United States. But I also had sympathy for the animals we were trapping. The cats were skittish and hungry, endearing. It wasn't their fault that they were on the street."

TWW team member Frank Ramirez commented, "The greatest danger to birds is cats, but our culture can't countenance the extermination of cats to preserve bird populations!"

How should local municipalities properly manage the populations of animals in the wild? What principles from our faith tradition can help guide our decisions about the treatment of domestic and wild animals?

Responding to the News

You might enjoy reflecting on a few stories about Francis of Assisi and considering what they can teach us about living peaceably with other creatures God has made.

Prayer suggested by Psalm 50:7-15; Luke 12:6-7; Psalm 84:1-4

O God, who knows all the birds of the air, to whom belong all the animals in forest and field, we can offer you nothing to fulfill any inadequacy in yourself. If you were hungry (what an idea!), you wouldn't need to come to us for food. You are all-sufficient, and you are all we need in all our circumstances. So we offer to you what we can give: our trust and thanksgiving for your love and grace. Amen.