

STATE’S BIRDS THREATENED BY EFFECTS OF PESTICIDES

Chemicals are ‘more toxic than DDT,’ and kill avian food sources



Hardy Kern wrote, “grassland birds such as Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks, which are native to Connecticut, and Dickcissels and Chestnutcollared Longspurs ... have declined by 53 percent.” Courtesy

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BYMAUREEN MURPHY SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

There is an insecticide threatening the health of birds in Connecticut and the Connecticut Audubon Society hopes 2025 will be the year the state further restricts its use.

“The evidence could hardly be more clear that neonicotinoid pesticides are bad for people, bad for birds and pollinators, and bad for rivers and the animals that live in them,” The Audubon Society’s “2024 Connecticut State of the Birds” report says.

These pesticides, also called neonics, “are a class of chemicals that act as insecticides by exerting neurotoxic effects,” according to the National Institutes of Health. That means the insecticides kill all manner of insects that birds feed on, according to the society.

The society now is asking the state of Connecticut for a new a law in 2025 that will reduce neonics in the environment.

While there are not “easy-to-access records” in Connecticut on the quantity of neonics now used in the state or “what they are being used on” the Audubon Society report estimates the approximate “number of acres for turf grass in general” for golf courses, and corn crops: turf grass, 300,000 acres; golf courses, between 8,500 and 25,500 acres; and corn, 24,000 acres.

Tom Andersen, director of communications for the Connecticut Audubon Society said the report highlights the dangers of neonicotinoids, as a class of insecticides significantly “more toxic than DDT.”Andersen has said, “The bird population in North America has fallen by about 30% — there are 3 billion fewer birds now than there were in 1970” but that society efforts, supported by members, help stem and reverse the population loss. “They show what can be done, and they show what the results would be if these successes were matched beyond Connecticut.”

Connecticut residents “don’t want to find out in 30 years that the bird population has fallen by 30 percent again and that one of the causes was pesticides,” the report says.

Connecticut birds in danger include the Connecticut State Bird, which is the American Robin, as well as the Eastern Bluebird, Barn Swallow, Bobolink, Chimney Swift, and Red-winged Blackbird, according to the report. The focus of the concern is the use of insecticides particularly on lawns, golf courses on fairways and greens, and use neonic-coated corn seeds when crops are plantedhere.

The report, written by a variety of authors in separate articles, describes, in one by Hardy Kern, that when these insecticides are used, “affected organisms (birds, bees, butterflies, and pests alike) then experience convulsions, organ failure, and death. Birds may thrash, vomit, become confused or lose the ability to fly and hide.”

Kern wrote, “grassland birds such as Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks, which are native to Connecticut, and Dickcissels and Chestnut collared Longspurs, which are birds of the Great Plains, have declined by 53 percent. The major commonality between these two groups is what they eat — bugs.”

Andersen said that particularly in the case of crops, the insecticide coating in most cases, does not help achieve desired results and notes the use of the pesticide DDT, once so prevalent, occurred until its dangers were exposed.

“Yes, they kill a lot of insects, but they are really not necessary for keeping your lawn in good shape,” Andersen said of neonicotinoids.

“Studies also link neonics to the collapse of fisheries and to higher rates of birth defects and stillbirth in deer; at the same time, neonics have become ubiquitous in their bodies,” Dan Raichel wrote in the Audubon report. The society wants the General Assembly to enact legislation to curb usage of the insecticide in the state. A call to action is underway numerous interested parties in the state who are working with lobbyists to draft legislation for state lawmakers to review in 2025.

The society also seeks for the new law to require “improved public access to data on neonic use,” noting in the report that certified pesticide applicators in Connecticut “are required to file annual documentation outlining the amount of pesticides they use. However, they do not have to report where they are applying the pesticides, and the information is not easily accessible, searchable, or understandable to the public.”

Neighboring states of Vermont and New York have successfully navigated restrictions regarding the use of neonics, according to the society,

In New Jersey, the state permits use of neonicotinoids ”only for agriculture; the state requires a license to buy and apply neonics. Neonics are prohibited in home gardens, lawns, landscapes, golf courses, and elsewhere,” according to the society. Concern on use of the insecticide has arisen in previous years in the state.

“Neonicotinoids, the most widely used insecticides in the United States, are found in hundreds of consumer products includinginsect sprays, powders, and seed treatments.

These systemic insecticides are absorbed by plants, making the entire plant deadly toxic, including its nectar, pollen and fruit. These poisons can linger in the soil for years, causing long-term harm,” the Friends of Animals testified in 2023 to the Environment Committee.

Connecticut currently restricts outdoor use of neonicotinoids to certified professionals, such as landscapers, golf course managers, and farmers but has no restrictions on use of coated seeds, the report says.

Deb Eccleston, membership director at The Connecticut Audubon Society, speaking about common backyard birds and their protection, said, “We need to do things now to try and help them,’ as recent studies show their decline is imminent, and these moments of wonder and awe may be lost forever.”

“Seeing a striking red cardinal on a snowy branch on a sunlit winter’s day, I am in awe,” she said.

She acknowledges that it can be hard for people to understand the impact of their use of pesticides and weed killers on the wingedcreatures who inhabit their yards. But she recalls that “I watched bees convulse and die due to spraying a lawn” with toxic chemicals to kill weeds. The bees’ inner radar was thrown off and they could not find their way back to the hive.”

People “spray their yards and don’t think about the consequences,” she adds.

Eccleston said she believes there are mental health benefits derived from observing winged creatures.

“Nature comforts us and we can comfort it, if we just look at what we are doing and try to be better stewards,” of our natural resources and wildlife, she said. “The issue at hand is that there has been a vast reduction in the numbers here (over 30% less) common birds. We have it within us now to help, but we have to choose.”

“Birds are everywhere and I always find something new to learn about them,” Eccleston said. “I am a learner and at times see them do something I have never seen before. Birds bring joy and are beautiful in their variety. The trials they overcome in order to persevere and survive ... (are amazing) and now I look at birds on the brink of extinction. I worry that we’re too late.”

An avid naturalist, Eccleston began bird watching during the pandemic and shared “posts on social media to help people identifybirds they may see in their backyard.” She then volunteered for Connecticut Audubon Society prior to working in her current position with organization. “This world is so hectic and crazy-watching birds calms me down and makes me stop.”

Although contemplating the destruction of the natural world can be depressing, Eccleston said, she finds that at CT Audubon it is inspiring to find like-minded people. “We have to get better at making our voices heard,” she shares. “I knew I wasn’t the only one (who cares about saving birds) and I am not ashamed of sharing my feelings with others.”

She said she also finds that the more that she “points it out to people, the more people respond with interest and ask questions.”Eccleston said she believes that it is important to “give people the correct knowledge to enjoy them (birds.)” For example, while photographing birds is engaging, she notes,”it is important to allow them to rest and pursue their food sources.”

Regarding the calming energy that results from bird watching, Eccleston said, “I know what nature brings for me, it can help.” She compares it to looking at the world through the eyes of a child, “those eyes are the ones we want to look through for the rest of our lives.” By sharing her respect and compassion Eccleston notes, “if I can change one person somewhere, that is a goodstart.”

She suggests that those interested in learning more about birds may want to try a free app available for smartphones called “Merlin Bird ID.” Eccleston listened for bird calls during the pandemic, used the application to identify them, then took screen shots when she saw them. She said she finds in watching birds, “it is never the same.”

Some birds may show up though they belong to different climates. Eccleston said she recalls a Cape May warbler that stayed in her yard from December 29 last year until spring, feasting on mealworms. “In the summer birds don’t need us,” she comments, “but in winter we can help provide nutrients.”

For more information about The Connecticut Audubon Society, visit

https://www.ctaudubon.org. Maureen Murphy is a freelance writer in Connecticut.