

How can we help migratory birds?



White Stork
(Sionnet 2023, PATRICIA BRIEL)

Approximately 120,000 migratory birds such as chaffins, European starlings and taurins left Switzerland late this year to go to their winter quarters. Every year, a decreasing number of migratory birds is recorded. Migrating birds are also spending longer in Europe, which raises questions on whether some will stop winter migration altogether. Is this due to climate change, and if so, what caused this change and what can we do about it?

How are birds affected by climate change and human activity?

Climate and available habitats are the things that determine the number of birds there are in Switzerland. Experts are already seeing the effects of climate change on some species. Higher temperatures for example, means migrants often return earlier in spring, and mountain birds are moving to higher altitudes. Certain species arrive several days earlier than they did thirty years ago because of climate change.

The biggest threat to migrating birds is loss and/or damage to their habitat. Much of this is caused by human

activity including agriculture and building work. The expansion of agriculture into important habitats and the increasing use of machinery and chemicals is the biggest threat to bird species. These are affecting at least 73% of threatened species. In Europe, this has resulted in an over 50% decline in a lot of the continent's farmland birds since 1980.

Light Pollution is also a reason, with up to 1 billion birds dying each year in the United States from colliding with buildings. As migratory birds travel

through cities with large buildings and bright lights, they can become disoriented by the lights, causing them to crash into buildings.

What can we do about it?

We can gather data to help experts and researchers understand how birds' migration is evolving and the impact of climate change. To recognize when species are at risk, it's important to detect the changes in the population early.

Birdwatchers help gather information with checklists of birds that get shared on websites like Ebird or Avibird. A bird checklist is a list of all the different bird species which occur within a specific area. Here is an example of the bird sightings recorded at the Sonnet marshland: [Marais de Sionnet, GE, CH - eBird Hotspot](https://ebird.org/hotspot/Marais_de_Sionnet_GE_CH)<https://ebird.org/hotspot>

Preserve Bird Habitats: Conservation

Areas with water and wetlands are an important habitat for animals and plants. They are especially important to migrating birds. In Switzerland, almost 90% of marshland has been destroyed over the last 200 years. The Rotherthum initiative which was voted in Switzerland in the 1980's includes the protection of marshlands in the Swiss constitution. Many marshlands and swamps have been restored thanks to this initiative.



(Sionnet 2023 Geneve, VICTOR.N)

For example, the **Sionnet marshland in Meinier** near Geneva had been dried up in the 1900s, it was then restored in the 1980s. It is one of birdwatchers' favorite place in the Geneva area, and a well-known area among ornithologists. It is very popular during spring and autumn migrations, but also during the breeding season. All year long, there is a chance to see for example Common Kestrels, Little Owls, Grey Herons and then, depending on the season, people can spot Bluethroats, Spotted Crakes, Garganeys, Common Teals, Great White Egrets, Common Stonechats, Western Marsh-harriers, Common Reed-warblers, Northern Lapwings, Peregrine Falcons.

During our visit to Sionnet early February 2023, local birdwatchers had spotted migrating birds, such as winter teals, great egrets, common snipes, herons, tigernut ducks, a white stork (see photo enclosed), a blue throat and a common chiffchaff (see photo). Most birdwatchers we interviewed were interested in photographing birds. Many of them counted birds and reported their numbers on specialized websites.

Other natural parks have been created that offer migratory birds somewhere to stop and eat during their migration. It is important for migratory birds to rest during their migration, and 15% of the birds migrating across Europe go through a part of Switzerland to avoid flying over the Alps. The Champ des Quatre-Vingts near Yverdon was built in 2015. It is now seen as the best Swiss site for hosting migrating shorebirds.

The marshland "Roselière de la plage des Eaux Vives" was created in 2020 on the border of Lake Lemman and became a success: over 90 species were spotted, including very rare migratory birds.

Also, migrating birds fly across international borders: it is important that countries cooperate, for instance to protect cross-border birds resting areas.

Smart project sighting

We need to avoid placing development and energy projects in or near important bird habitat. Some areas are already protected from development, such as national parks, but not well known areas may not be. There are tools available to help developers evaluate locations that might have the fewest impacts to bird habitat.

Compensate with Habitat Mitigation

Sometimes, it is not possible to avoid destruction of important bird habitats. For instance, when there aren't enough homes for people to live in, and houses need to be built in these areas. In this case, it is important to create another habitat for the birds somewhere else not too far.

Use of less chemicals and pesticides will help reduce our impact on migrating birds.

Help migratory birds secure the best nests. There are also some very simple actions that developers and others can take to preserve important nesting habitat during the breeding season. For instance, planting bushes and trees that many birds use and depend on. Placing bird feeders and baths which attract endangered species and serve to provide them with food, water, and shelter.



Common chiffchaff
(Sionnet 2023, PATRICIA BRIEL)

NOTE: In order to prepare this article, I interviewed 3 birdwatchers in the Sionnet marschland. Thank you to Patricia Briel, birdwatcher in the

Sionnet marshland for kindly permitting me to use her photos.

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