

IU researcher seeks help documenting 'bird strikes - Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) - October 9, 2020

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Just before the light of the morning sun begins to shine in the eastern sky, Sarah Wanamaker is out on the Indiana University campus looking at the ground around six of the campus buildings with most windows.

Her daily, three- to four-hour search takes her along sidewalks, into the bushes and in the "off-road" areas where most people might not look.

Wanamaker is looking for dead birds killed by hitting the windows of campus buildings for a research project to determine how many birds are killed by "bird strikes." Each time she finds a dead bird, she records data about it and its location and the nearby building and takes photos. As lab manager for IU professor Ellen Ketterson and a research associate with the IU Environmental Resilience Institute, she knows about birds.

"The goal of my project is to work toward a solution to make IU a bird-safe place," she explained.

This week, from Oct. 5-11, has special meaning, since it's Global Bird Rescue week, organized by FLAP Canada, which wants people to document birds that die because of collisions with buildings during their fall migration. The hope for FLAP Canada and Wanamaker is to inspire people to make changes to their homes and workplace buildings to ensure birds can see the windows as an obstacle, not as clear space to fly through.

Wanamaker has recruited a team at IU to help look for window strikes through Oct. 11. All the information will be documented using the Global Bird Collision Mapper, which is an online tool FLAP Canada is using. The information also will become part of Wanamaker's personal dataset.

Currently, millions of birds are migrating to their winter habitat and many fly at night, which can be an even more dangerous time for them to navigate the buildings that loom in their path. Lights on inside buildings can attract birds, Wanamaker said.

While Wanamaker has just begun her second week of the bird strike study, she's been amazed at how many dead birds she's already found.

"Yesterday, I found 13 birds at six buildings I'm monitoring," she said. "At this point, I've found about 30 dead birds, in a little over a week. I'm astonished. If you scale that up to how many buildings are on campus ... I'm blown away by those numbers. You have to think of all the birds I'm not finding."

She knows that groundskeepers, maintenance workers as well as animal predators have removed many of birds before she can find them. She's hoping some of those people might take the time

to help her with her research.

Wanamaker is posting flyers around campus to both raise the awareness of window strikes and to have anyone who discovers a dead bird contact her at a project-specific email, strikes@indiana.edu, submitting information on where and when the bird was found, along with photos of the bird.

So far, Wanamaker has found dead birds that were migrating through the area as well as local residents. Most have been songbirds. She has photos of a yellow-bellied sapsucker (a species of woodpecker), wood thrush, Swaison's thrush and many species of warblers, which were migrating to warmer climes.

"The end goal is to try and find a solution for this," Wanamaker said, adding that her project is in the early stages. "I hope this project can end up at the university in Bloomington and expand to other campuses in Indiana. We need to develop buildings to be bird-safe and retrofit and add bird-safe equipment."

She anticipates collecting data through the fall and hopes the project gains traction with other researchers as she develops her project, with hopes of securing funding to sustain it as she develops both the database and possible ways of preventing the window strikes.

One of those collaborations would be starting a "Lights Out" program at IU. Wanamaker is already discussing possible ways of measuring the light output of buildings on the IU campus with Bryce Himebaugh, a professor of engineering who is creating light sensors to measure light output for a study in the Hoosier National Forest. Those sensors could be used on the IU campus as well. An added feature could detect the sound of bird strikes and record them for a better measure of how many birds hit buildings, Wanamaker said. But these sensors wouldn't be ready to use until the spring or fall migration in 2021, she said.

"I'd hope to use these data as part of a 'Lights Out IU' initiative, since many campus buildings leave their interior lights on 24/7," Wanamaker said.

"I'm really anxious to work toward a solution," she said. "Now is the time to act. ... Thirty birds might not seem like a lot, but in the small amount of time and in the small space ... 1 billion birds are killed each year in the U.S. and Canada alone. I can't believe we still have birds left at this rate."