

WEST Wildlife Summary Briefs

THE SCIENCE of Bird Migration

What are common questions about bird migration?

- Why do birds migrate?
- Is migration dangerous for birds?
- What are the major risks during migration?
- Do migrating birds follow specific flight paths between their breeding and wintering grounds?

What does current science tell us about these questions?

Birds migrate to take advantage of resources that become available at different times in different places. For example, an insect-eating bird can find abundant food across the northern US during spring and summer, but not in winter and, therefore, migrates south to find available resources.

Migration is a risky time of year for most bird species.

Death rates during migration are much higher—in some cases, as much as 20 times higher—than death rates during the breeding or wintering seasons.

Most deaths during migration are from natural causes.

Starvation, disease, storms, and predators all take a toll. Juvenile birds undertaking their first migration in autumn are especially vulnerable, particularly during flights across major barriers, such as oceans or deserts.

Human-caused deaths of migrating birds also occur.

Collisions with buildings and communication towers are the main sources of human-caused fatalities of migratory birds.

Birds migrate in broad fronts across the entire airspace of the US.

On most nights during spring or autumn migration, the nation's system of weather-surveillance radar shows migrating birds in flight across the entire US.

Birds do not follow “highways in the sky” during migration.

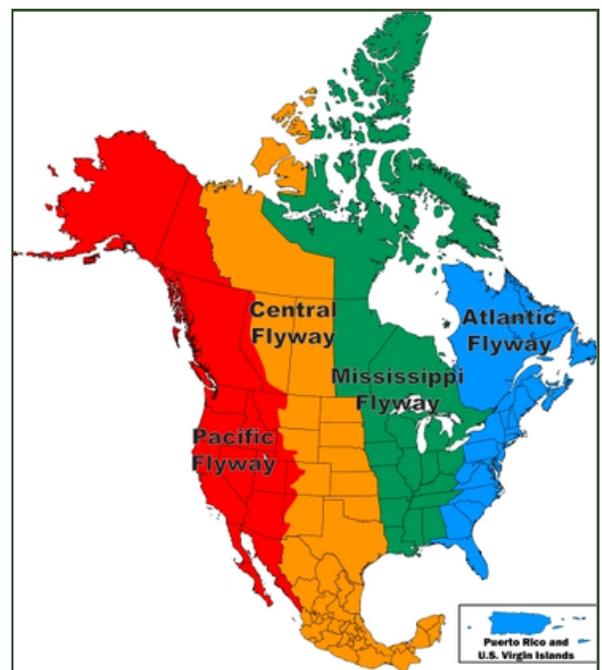
The path taken on migration is not preset; migration is fluid, unpredictable, and continuously adapting to local conditions. The path followed by an individual bird to reach its wintering or breeding grounds depends on its health, fitness, and the weather conditions encountered while en route.



Migratory Flyways

Migratory flyways are a concept created to help organize and administer wildlife management. Migratory flyways are drawn using administrative boundaries. They do not represent the actual paths of migratory birds.

Every location in the US falls within one of four US Fish and Wildlife Service flyways.



Migratory Bird Program Administrative Flyways | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service