

WEST Wildlife Summary Briefs

WHAT'S KILLING Birds in the US?



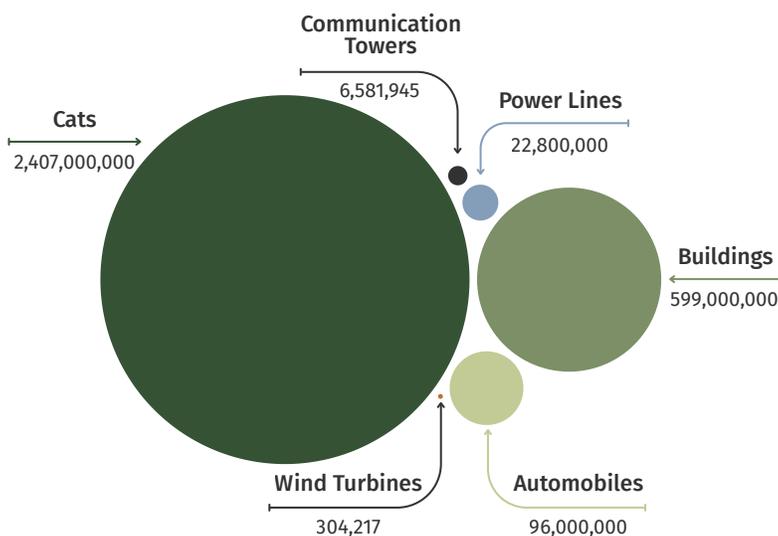
What causes bird deaths?

- Climate change and habitat loss indirectly kill many birds by increasing the risk of starvation, disease, or predation. Exactly how many birds die from climate change and habitat loss is not known, but they are considered the main drivers of population decline for most birds.
- Scientists know more about the magnitude of direct causes of death.
- The most important direct cause of death is predation. Eggs and very young birds are particularly vulnerable. For example, predators kill about 70% of all songbirds before the end of their first summer of life.
- Domestic cats prey on birds at every stage of life, from eggs to adults. Among the direct causes of death that scientists have quantified, free-ranging pet cats and unowned feral cats kill more birds than all other direct human sources combined.
- Collisions with automobiles and infrastructure also kill many birds.

What are the consequences of human-caused bird deaths?

- Deaths caused directly by humans do not necessarily cause bird populations to decline. For example, many ducks and geese are killed each year by hunters, but waterfowl are one of the only bird groups in North America whose populations have actually *increased* over the past 50 years. Hunting is strictly regulated and scientifically managed, and hunters have invested billions of dollars in conserving habitat for ducks and geese, allowing populations to thrive.
- Unlike hunting, the other major, direct human causes of bird deaths—cats, buildings, and cars—are not subject to scientific management, nor are their impacts deliberately offset by habitat conservation. It is possible, but not proven, the combined magnitude of these factors is enough to cause some bird populations to decline, especially in combination with indirect effects of habitat loss and climate change.

Annual bird deaths from direct human causes, by source*



Data sources
 Automobiles: Rabie et al. 2024
 Wind turbines: REWI 2025
 All other: Loss et al. 2015

*In addition to these incidental causes of death, licensed hunters legally shoot about 40-50 million game birds each year in the US.