

Listening to the Birds

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The history of humankind is part fact and part fable and is strewn with iconic references to birds throughout. When the Gauls crept up the moonlit slopes of Capitoline Hill back in the first century BC, the sentries and their dogs slept, blissfully unaware of the danger. It was the geese that woke and raised the alarm, according to Titus Livius, just in time to save the garrison. The tale echoes, in romantic fashion, the theme of this essay. All around us, the clamor of birds is signaling danger: will we wake from our complacent sleep in time?

It is increasingly clear that biodiversity, the bedrock of life, is eroding away. We can only hope to reverse this process through vigilance and sound science—by assessing the risks biodiversity faces and setting priorities for its protection. Aside from our Roman geese, there are a number of reasons to consider birds as the most reliable early warning system at our disposal: birds are highly visible, familiar, and responsive to environmental fluctuations.

Avian diversity—around 10,000 species by current reckoning—is broad enough to show subtle shifts and patterns, and yet not so broad as to strain recording and analysis. Birds are widespread from poles to equator, from midocean to mountaintop. They are also better understood than all other vertebrates in terms of taxonomy, biogeography, and ecology. An active global network of expert and amateur ornithologists constantly generates a huge supply of data, allowing a glimpse of global population trends over recent decades. Birds provide a valuable starting point for mapping the richness and uniqueness of species in an area, as well as threats and conservation priorities. Therefore, until we are equipped with the time and resources for rigorous interdisciplinary exploration and analysis, we can, and should, use birds to judge and monitor the state of the wild.

A great deal of information on the status and distribution of birds has been compiled and analyzed by BirdLife International¹ and synthesized in the *State of the World's Birds*.² This document can serve as a progress report for global biodiversity, assessing its health, why it is being lost, and how we should conserve it;

