

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

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OUR VIEW

Dying birds offer timely warning to humans

The mystery of the dying birds is just another warning sign that all is not well in the environment around us.

In New Mexico and portions of Colorado, birds have been dropping dead — one of the largest die-offs in recent decades, according to scientists. The why is being investigated; wildfire smoke, drought and even a recent cold snap are potential factors in the deaths.

Like so much in nature, the causes are likely interrelated.

Drought and cold have diminished insect populations, essential food for many birds. The smoke from California, Oregon, Colorado and Arizona wildfires is suspected of having produced toxins damaging to birds. More basically, heavy smoke could have caused the migrating creatures to take flight too early, with not enough fat reserves to

make the journey.

Nature and its many parts work seamlessly together — until they don't.

Scientists are examining the bodies of the birds, looking for answers. One thing they've already noticed — the dead birds have few fat reserves or body fat.

Months likely will pass before we understand just why so many birds died in 2020. The deaths included everything from swallows and warblers to flycatchers. It rightly is being called a national tragedy.

Austin Fisher, an independent journalist, videotaped a scene near Velarde by the Rio Grande. Dead birds littered the earth, a scene repeated across New Mexico.

In Southern New Mexico, dead birds began showing up in late August at White Sands Missile Range. Usually around a half dozen birds might be found dead in a week;

in late August, that number rose to a couple of hundred.

Dead birds were found in Santa Fe, too, whether in front yards or along walking trails. These wonders of nature could not make their seasonal migration.

The huge die-off is part of a broader problem. Bird species are having a difficult time in our modern era. Their habitat is being destroyed — with breeding grounds such as grasslands and the Arctic tundra particularly hard hit. Cats are eating them to the tune of 2.6 billion birds yearly in the United States and Canada.

According to the Audubon Society, the U.S. has lost one out of four birds in the last 50 years. That means 3 billion fewer birds today than in 1970.

After the study was announced in September 2019, the website www.3billionbirds.org

was launched. It offers seven simple actions that will protect birds. The solutions include everything from marking windows so birds don't try to fly into them, keeping cats indoors, planting native gardens and avoiding the use of pesticides. Other solutions include buying coffee that is grown in settings that don't harm birds — there is even a Bird Friendly coffee logo. Cut down on plastics use. And finally, there is what so many of us are doing while at home, watching birds and sharing what we see.

Scientists need the reports of people on the ground — from their yards, neighborhoods or in the wild — to learn how birds are faring. Their survival affects us all. The die-off of 2020 is a singular event, but given the heating planet and continued climate disruption, it will likely be repeated. Birds are warning us, if only we listen — and change our ways.