

Albuquerque Downtown Window Strike Survey Summary

The Urban Conservation Treaty for Migratory Birds is a program established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to facilitate collaboration between cities and partners to conserve migratory birds through education, hazard reductions, citizen science, conservation actions, and conservation and habitat improvement strategies in urban/suburban areas. This year, Albuquerque was designated a recipient of UCTMB funds.

As two of the main partners, CNMAS and Valle de Oro NWR decided to focus on allocating a significant portion of these funds towards reducing hazards to birds. One of our project goals in reducing hazards to birds was to begin developing plans for light-out/window strikes in the ABQ metro area. According to American Bird Conservancy, collision with glass is the single biggest known killer of birds in the United States, claiming hundreds of millions or more lives each year. Unlike some sources of mortality that predominantly kill weaker individuals, there is no distinction among victims of glass. Because glass is equally dangerous for strong, healthy, breeding adults, it can have a particularly serious impact on populations.

The problem of bird collisions with glass is greatly exacerbated by artificial light. Light escaping from building interiors or from exterior fixtures can attract birds, particularly during migration on foggy nights or when the cloud base is low. Strong beams of light can cause birds to circle in confusion and collide with structures, each other, or even the ground. Others may simply land in lighted areas and must then navigate an urban environment rife with other dangers, including more glass.

With this background knowledge of the extreme hazard posed to birds by window strikes, Jennifer Owen-White, Raymond VanBuskirk, and I set out to quantify the degree to which window strike mortality is impacting birds in the Albuquerque Downtown District. Working together, we established a protocol. Specific “problem” buildings were identified and a strategic route established between them. We conducted surveys three mornings each week during the month of May.

On the first day of the spring survey, Raymond and I found five bird casualties: BCHU; WWDO, HOSP, COYE, CHSP, all of which had clearly perished as the result of a window strike. Over the course of the study period, a total of twelve casualties were found. These included: four White-winged Doves; one unidentifiable Nightjar sp.; two House Sparrows; one MacGillivray’s Warbler; one House Finch; one Black-chinned Hummingbird; one Common Yellowthroat; and one Chipping Sparrow

Three surveyors conducted surveys along the same routes during fall migration, August 15 – September 30 and found a total of 14 casualties. The casualties found included four White-winged Doves, three Black-chinned Hummingbirds, one Wilson’s Warbler, one MacGillivray’s Warbler, a Hepatic Tanager, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Lessor Goldfinch, and feathers of an unidentifiable bird. Photos and notes were taken with every finding and a majority of the specimens were retained for further scientific use.

Our findings confirm our hypothesis that mortality due to window strikes poses a significant threat to birds living in, or migrating through Downtown Albuquerque. The number of casualties discovered in our relatively small study area over a short period of time holds staggering implications for the magnitude of mortalities likely to occur throughout Albuquerque. Furthermore, even the entirety of Albuquerque is a very small portion of the urban areas of the world which we share with our avian friends.

Addressing the issue of window strike mortality is a necessity in our quest to reduce hazards to migrating birds in urban areas. Increasing awareness and involving the community is of utmost importance. Our thoughts on further action are as follows:

A number of the casualties in the spring were found at the same building where USFWS offices are located. We would like to conduct a survey of people in the 500 gold building who have window offices to ask if they have ever seen or heard a bird strike. In the fall, the majority of birds were found at the northeast side of the Bank of the West building. At least one person working in the building is aware of the bird window strike issue.

American Bird Conservancy and other resources have ideas on what buildings can do to prevent bird strikes. Organizing and promoting this information among citizens, architects, and city planners is a daunting, but vital task.

We would like to begin planning for a downtown lights out event, again, to increase awareness.

We would like to partner with the Downtown Action Team to plan for an acknowledgement system for buildings that institute bird friendly practices.

Finally, to link our efforts to the bigger picture, we are excited to partner with FLAP, a Canadian-based organization that works to safeguard migratory birds in the urban environment through education, policy development, research, rescue, and rehabilitation. We have entered our findings in FLAP mapper, their online database, and are thrilled to begin collaborating with the developer, who is clearly a wealth of knowledge and an incredibly valuable ally to have in our quest for making our modern world a safer place for birds.

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