

and periodically washing stuffed animals might reduce a child's exposure and prevent long-term health problems. "We don't want people to get panicked," Falconer says, "but they need to be aware that there are many different types of exposure that they often don't think about."—Todd Neale

Sun Singing

Karl Berg was doing research in the rainforest of Ecuador, where he had lived for 10 years, when he got curious. For a week he had been going out in the morning and recording the names of all the birds he heard, and when he tallied them up there were 65 species. Berg, a biologist at the University of California at Berkeley, suddenly wondered if there was any order to the dawn chorus. There was, it turned out, but no one had figured out why some birds start singing before others. Now Berg has. Years before, Aldo Leopold hypothesized that luminosity and differences between forest strata might be driving this, says Berg. "We really did the first test of that, 40 years later." What Berg and his colleagues found, after recording and analyzing more than 100 hours of Ecuadorian birdsong, was that those birds higher in trees and with larger eyes started singing before lower-level birds with smaller eyes. Berg theorizes that predatory influences are the cause. "Singing can be dangerous if you can't see," he says. But when the morning light hits, it's safe to start crooning.—Frank Bures



Gimme Shelter

LAST DECEMBER SANDY REED SLOGGED through the muddy streets of Jourdan River Estates, a residential neighborhood on the Gulf Coast in southwestern Mississippi. As a participant in Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC), she was searching for birds in an area of Hancock County just three miles from the path of Hurricane Katrina's eye. A few giant live oaks and some shrubs survived, but most of the vegetation had either been torn down by the winds or killed by the flood of salt water. Four months after the storm, few houses were still standing, and the landscape was littered with debris—roofs, washing machines, sheds. "We didn't realize how bad it was," says Reed, a science teacher and president of the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society (MCAS).

The CBC results confirmed her worst fears. Counters in Hancock County saw just 10,649 birds from 132 species, the lowest total in 22 years. "The numbers are down substantially, especially for what we consider the local yard birds, like Carolina chickadees, tufted titmice, and downy woodpeckers," says Jerry Bird, an MCAS board member who compiled the county's results. Most distressing, he says, is "how quiet everything is in the woods."

The morning after Katrina passed, Judy Toups, a founding member of the MCAS, noticed an unusually high number of migrating ruby-throated hummingbirds in her yard. Realizing there would be few flowering plants or feeders available for the hummingbirds, she started Operation Backyard Recovery. Besides scattering hummingbird feeders in hurricane-ravaged areas, the operation also holds free birdhouse-building clinics to supply temporary shelters to birds that nest in the hollows of trees.

"We're most concerned with the cavity nesters that overwinter here, because they've lost the trees they depend on," says Mark LaSalle, Audubon Mississippi's coastal project director. The simple, boxlike birdhouses are made from fence boards and other lumber left strewn about after the hurricane. "We're up to our armpits in fence boards," LaSalle says. "We've got to pick up the pieces and make something good out of it."

People of all ages showed up at the clinics, hammering birdhouses together to take home, which for many, including LaSalle, is a FEMA trailer. About 400 birdhouses have been built thus far, Reed says. (Additionally, Audubon Vermont donated 40 birdhouse kits made from a white pine that fell in a storm at the Green Mountain Audubon Center.) Local children are eager to help shelter birds, even as repairs continue on their own homes. "A lot of the trees got knocked down by Katrina, and that's where the birds live," says Lindsay Parker, one of Reed's seventh graders at Pass Christian Middle School. "Now they have no place to go, or a nice warm place to stay."

Besides building birdhouses, Audubon Mississippi has teamed up with the National Arbor Day Foundation to replant native trees and restore much-needed bird habitat. For each dollar donated to the Katrina Tree Recovery Campaign (www.arborday.org/Katrina), a tree will be sent to Mississippi from the foundation's nursery in Tennessee and distributed by Audubon along the Gulf Coast. For additional information, go to www.msaudubon.org/katrina/restoration.php.

Alexander Walrod (with hammer) and Braedon Kimball take hurricane relief into their own hands.