

COLUMNISTS

Big Country master naturalist: Turn off outdoor nighttime lights to save migrating birds

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One advantage of living in Texas is that our geographic location puts us in a position to enjoy both spring and fall bird migrations. Though few of us are aware, there is a river of birds over our heads at night called the Central Flyway.

Unfortunately, night flight has become more dangerous to birds because of man-made changes in our environment. Tall buildings and towers present collision dangers, especially if weather forces birds to fly lower.

Another big risk is closer to home — our very homes and their lighting. Inside and outside lights can confuse birds, causing them to land during the night.

Most migratory birds fly at night, landing in the early hours of the morning to rest and feed. Night flight helps birds to both avoid predators and take advantage of good weather and winds. During the fall and spring migrations, 2 billion birds will pass through Texas.

Observing daytime feeding behavior may provide an alert birder the opportunity to spot some unusual birds. The spring migration period started March 1.

Often birds are drawn to the lighted trees of landscaped areas. They cannot distinguish the reflection of trees in windows from the real thing, resulting in many dangerous collisions.

A tiny bird, flying rapidly into a solid piece of glass, can suffer injuries to its internal organs or breakage of its hollow bones. Even if a bird is only stunned by the crash, it is then vulnerable to predators on the ground.

The large areas of night lighting in cities and towns can confuse birds. Night lighting is becoming more common in rural and suburban areas.

Many Texans are involved in a program to help limit the damage to migrating birds because of night lighting. The Lights Out Texas program, facilitated by Texan by Nature and Audubon Texas, is an educational program that encourages turning off unnecessary lights between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. during the period of migration.

You can find more information on the Lights Out Texas program at Texanbynature.org.

Cornell University's BirdCast is another great online resource that shows radar images of actual bird migrations. The following are tips to help reduce migratory bird mortality around your own home.

- ▶ Is it essential? If not, turn those outside lights out from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. during spring migration from March 1 to June 15.
- ▶ Keep light inside! Avoid inside lights drawing birds by lowering blinds and closing curtains.
- ▶ Have landscape lighting? Try not to illuminate trees or garden beds.
- ▶ Re-direct necessary lights downward. Use motion sensors when possible.

Our birds are a source of enjoyment and a valuable part of our environment. Helping them to survive a long and dangerous migration can be as easy as turning out the lights.

Upcoming Big County Master Naturalist Events:

- ▶ March 19: Cedar Creek Waterway Hike, 9 a.m.
- ▶ March 26: Star Party at Abilene State Park, 8:30-10:30 p.m.
- ▶ April 2: Lake Hike at Abilene State Park, 9 a.m.
- ▶ April 16: Cedar Creek Waterway Hike, 9 a.m.

If you're planning to attend hikes or star parties, be sure to check [Facebook.com/BCTXMN](https://www.facebook.com/BCTXMN) in advance for special directions, weather-related changes or COVID restrictions.

Marianne Marugg is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist chapter. All master naturalists are volunteers interested in the outdoors. Learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program at txmn.tamu.edu.