

High Country News

KNOW THE WEST

Antidotes for ecological forgetfulness

Bear witness, make a record, pass it on.

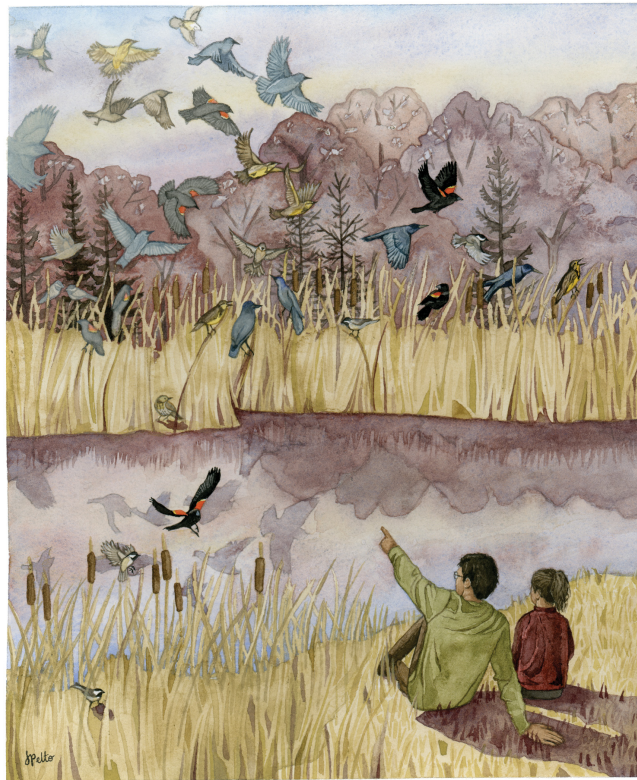
Jason Mark | ESSAY | Nov. 1, 2022 | *From the print edition*

The disappearances are almost everywhere, so they are difficult to discern. Since the 1970s, the populations of many of the most common North American birds have plummeted. The number of western meadowlarks has decreased by 37%, and grasslands in general have lost an estimated 720 million birds. Populations of piñon jays — one of the signature birds of the Western piñon-juniper landscape — are down a stunning 85%. Altogether, an estimated 3 billion birds have disappeared from the continent in the last couple of generations. Spring may not be silent, but it's certainly less raucous than it used to be.

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Did you notice?

I can't honestly say that I did. I'm a middle-aged backyard birder with middling birding skills, and my corner of the Pacific Northwest still feels full of feathered companions. I regularly hear the sonorous springtime song of the Swainson's thrush, the cheep of chickadees, and the screech of the osprey family that this summer made a nest in a Douglas fir outside my home. Those avian losses may have happened in my lifetime, but they were awfully hard to keep track of. Sure, I noticed that there were fewer red-winged blackbirds in the tule-reed-ringed pond that, for more than a decade, I visited weekly. But how many fewer? And how will my daughter even recognize such losses, since her notion of a "natural" number of red-winged blackbirds was formed in an already-impoverished reality?

Ecological forgetfulness isn't uncommon. When researchers in the United Kingdom interviewed people about the disappearance of common birds, they found that young people were largely unaware of population declines witnessed by previous generations. A few study participants, old and young, hadn't even noticed the declines that happened before their eyes. The researchers attributed these results to "shifting baseline syndrome": the way our unreliable memories blind us to the magnitude of environmental changes.



Jill Pelto/High Country News

Since fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly coined the term in the 1990s, researchers have discovered just how deeply shifting baseline syndrome can disrupt our understanding of the more-than-human world. In one investigation, a researcher reviewed dockside photos of trophy fishermen in Key West taken between 1957 and 2007. During that time, the fish got significantly smaller, and their average weight shrank by nearly 90%. Yet the smiles of the anglers in the photos stayed the same size. As the world got tinier, they kept on grinning.

Shifting baseline *syndrome* — a clinical phrase, like something from psychiatry’s formal manual of mental disorders — poses real challenges for conservationists. Studies show that it influences our perception of changing climates as well as how — and whether — children develop a commitment to environmental protection.

It’s difficult to know what, exactly, we’re trying to save because, as a culture, we risk forgetting what it was we once hoped to safeguard. Amid collective amnesia, the goals of conservation become targets swaying in the dark.

To be good future ancestors, we’ll have to actually change our cognitive habits and our tendency toward forgetfulness. We’ll have to turn memory into an organ of conservation — because without memory, there’s no chance of repair or restoration, rewilding or renewal.

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So, what are the antidotes to collective amnesia?

Neuroscience is a good place to start. Many of the same techniques and habits that help to preserve individual memories and keep dementia at bay can also protect our shared ecological memories.

Attentiveness is the most important thing. “Attention is essential for creating a memory of anything,” writes Harvard neuroscientist Lisa Genova, and this applies to the declining state of the natural world, too. We forget how many red-winged blackbirds once nested in the pond for the same reason we forget that we parked the car on Level Red-B in the garage: We weren’t paying attention in the first place.

When landscape becomes the focus of our attention, something more than a backdrop, we’re more likely to remember changes in it. “Our brains have evolved to remember what is meaningful,” Genova reports.

Neuroscience also knows that physical activity boosts memory, and so exercise — especially, in this case, outdoor exercise — is essential. We need to cultivate muscle memory, since (as any carpenter or guitarist knows) physical repetition helps cement neural networks. Embodied experiences — the sight of epic vistas; the feeling of wind in the face; the forest's mossy scent, a sylvan version of Proust's madeleine — can create indelible memories, and those memories can counter the normalization of environmental destruction.

Still, we inevitably forget most of what happens to us. Notes can help. You don't need to catalog the appearance of each bloom with the exactitude of Thoreau or note daily temperatures with the precision of the National Weather Service. A garden log or nature journal will do. And remember to tell your friends and family (especially the littles) about the changes you've experienced. Each of us can become, in our own modest way, an environmental storyteller, passing down the oral histories of the places we inherited.

So an initial prescription for shifting baseline syndrome goes something like this: Be outside as much as you can. Bear witness. Make a record. Pass it on.

These treatments may sound familiar — they are, after all, old-time home remedies for our conservation ills — but they are imbued with new urgency. In the midst of the Anthropocene, or “the Great Acceleration,” or whatever you prefer to call this bewildering era of hyper-speed changes, remembering will have to become a practice of the mindful conservationist.

Ecological memory alone won't deliver us from our environmental crises; there's no going back to the past. Yet memory can play an important role in figuring out the future. Remembrances of Earth's past can serve as a kind of cultural touchstone, a common shore from which we can navigate the uncharted waters of this hot, chaotic, fast-moving century.

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