

In the most untouched, pristine parts of the Amazon, birds are dying. Scientists may finally know why

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What kinds of birds do you usually see near your home in summer and winter?
- What can we do to help birds that live in our parks and gardens?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Read the definitions and match them to a word from the wordpool.

climate change
count

produce
protect

rainforests
raise

released
vanishing

1. large, wet forests with many plants and animals _____
2. to take care of a child or animal until they grow up _____
3. to say how many of something there are _____
4. to keep something or someone safe _____
5. slowly going away or disappearing _____
6. to make or create something _____
7. helped something or someone be free _____
8. when the weather on Earth slowly changes, making it hotter or colder (usually because of human activity) _____

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Farmers use natural resources to grow fruit and vegetables to _____ food for people and animals.
2. Alicia is only two years old, but she can already _____ to 20!
3. Many different animals are _____ because their homes are being destroyed.
4. The wildlife park _____ two male rhinos back into the wild last week.
5. We must _____ our oceans to help sea animals, such as whales and dolphins.
6. The Amazon and the Congo are two of the biggest _____ in the world.
7. Parents need to work hard to _____ their children to be healthy and happy.
8. _____ is making summers hotter and winters shorter.

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Tess McClure
30 January, 2025

- 1 Something strange was happening to the birds at Tiputini, a research center in the Amazonian area of Ecuador. This place is far from cities and people, so scientists can study animals in nature. But bird numbers were falling.
- 2 John G. Blake, an ecologist, had studied the birds since 2000. Every morning, he woke up early to count them. Sometimes, he caught birds in nets and then released them. Over the years, the number of birds went up and down. But by 2012, he noticed a big problem – fewer birds every year. By 2022, almost half had disappeared.
- 3 Blake didn't need numbers to know something was wrong. The forest was quieter. The birds' morning songs were different, and some birds were just gone.
- 4 In many places, birds disappear because of pollution, farms and cats. But Tiputini had none of these. So why were the birds still vanishing?
- 5 Scientists found similar problems in other rainforests. In Brazil, bird numbers were much lower than in the 1980s. In Panama, a study showed that 70 per cent of bird species had lower numbers, and some had almost disappeared.
- 6 For years, scientists searched for answers. Blake and another scientist, Bette A. Loiselle, studied the problem in 2015 but didn't find a clear answer. The birds were not unwell and there was no pollution. "I think the problem is much bigger," Blake said. The main problem? Climate change.
- 7 Recent studies show that hotter weather is bad for birds. In Brazil, scientists found that when the weather was hotter, more birds died. Just a 1°C increase made survival much harder for 83 per cent of bird species.
- 8 Why? Birds need food like insects and plants. If insects die or plants produce flowers at the wrong time, birds can't find enough food. This makes it harder to raise young birds. Over time, bird numbers drop.
- 9 For a long time, people thought big forests could protect birds. But now, scientists see this is not enough. The Amazon is changing, and birds are disappearing.
- 10 For scientists like Blake, this is sad. "When we first came, there were so many birds," he said. "Now, there aren't many birds left."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b or c).

1. Where is Tiputini?
 - a. in a city in Ecuador
 - b. in the Amazonian area of Ecuador
 - c. in Brazil
2. How did John G. Blake study the birds?
 - a. He counted them every morning.
 - b. He took photos of them.
 - c. He lived in the rainforest with them.
3. By 2022, how many birds had disappeared from Tiputini?
 - a. all of them
 - b. almost half of them
 - c. only a few of them
4. What is NOT mentioned as a usual cause of bird disappearance?
 - a. pollution
 - b. cats
 - c. hunters
5. Why is hot weather bad for birds?
 - a. Birds don't like sunshine.
 - b. Birds can't find enough food.
 - c. Birds have problems flying when it's hot.

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6. What happened to bird numbers in Panama according to the study?
 - a. 70 per cent of bird species had lower numbers.
 - b. Bird numbers increased by 70 per cent.
 - c. The birds moved to different forests.

4 Key language

a. Find forms of the following words in the article.

appear

ecology

few

science

survive

well

b. Complete the sentences with the forms of the words from the previous activity that you found in the article.

1. My doctor gave me some medicine because I was feeling _____.
2. Food and water are essential for an animal's _____.
3. This year, the snow in the mountains _____ fast because of climate change.
4. There are _____ Asian elephants in the wild than there were before.
5. _____ study, research and find evidence to understand different things around us.
6. A(n) _____ works to understand and protect plants, animals and the places where they live.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Have you noticed any changes in the numbers of birds or animals where you live?
- The article says climate change affects birds because it changes when insects and flowers appear. What can humans do to stop the problem of climate change?

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6 In your own words

- a. In pairs or small groups, research online to find evidence of bird population decline in a different location from Tiputini. Then:
- list possible causes (both human-related and climate-related).
 - outline what evidence supports each possible cause.
 - propose one realistic solution based on your findings.
- b. Share the information you found with your class.