The Guardian

one stop english

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Why do you think there are fewer birds, even in places without people?
- What problems do scientists have when they try to understand why some animals are disappearing?
- Apart from protected areas, what other ideas could help save wildlife?

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.

decline	impact	rare	suspect
flower	isolation	remote	the dawn chorus
fragile	ornithologist	shrinking	vanishing
habitat loss	pesticides	species	

1. a person who studies birds _____
2. a strong effects or influence on someone or something _____
3. the destruction and disappearance of places where animals and plants live _____
4. getting smaller in size, amount or number _____
5. a chemical used to kill insects that damage plants _____
6. a decrease or reduction in something over time _____
7. describing a place that is far away from cities or people _____
8. something that is not common or doesn't happen very often _____
9. the songs of birds early in the morning _____
10. types of animals or plants that are the same _____
11. becoming less noticeable or disappearing _____

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12. someone or something that causes a serious problem _____
13. a situation where something or someone is separated from others _____
14. easily broken or damaged; not strong _____
15. when a plant produces colourful petals and later makes seeds or fruit _____

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

1. Scientists believe that climate change is the main _____ that causes sea levels to rise.
2. Cherry trees usually _____ in early spring, and the park becomes a pink paradise.
3. The island is so _____ that it takes two days to reach it by boat.
4. Tigers are the largest living cat _____, but many of them, like the Bengal tigers, are at risk of disappearing.
5. Some jungle ecosystems are very _____ and are easily affected by small changes in temperature.
6. A number of rubbish bins in our neighbourhood are _____ during the night, and we have no idea who is taking them.
7. An experienced _____ can identify hundreds of birds just by listening to their song.
8. A big problem that animals face is _____ because people are destroying or polluting the places where they live.
9. After months of living on his own in _____, Gerald found it hard to talk to people again.
10. I'm sure that these chocolate bars are _____. They used to be much bigger than they are now!

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11. In the summer, _____ of the birds outside usually wakes me up at about 4 a.m.

12. Some animals are so _____ that the only living examples of them are found in wildlife parks.

13. There has been a steady _____ in the number of bees and butterflies in the region because of the building constructions.

14. Farmers use _____ to protect their crops, but they can also harm insects and birds.

15. What will be the _____ of the new road construction on the local wildlife?

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Populations have been falling for decades, even in tracts of forest undamaged by humans. Experts have spent two decades trying to understand what is going on

Tess McClure

30 January, 2025

1 Something was happening to the birds at Tiputini. This remote research centre in the Ecuadorian Amazon, gives scientists a rare chance to study wildlife in an environment not touched by humans. Yet, despite this isolation, bird numbers were falling.

2 Since 2000, ecologist John G. Blake has been studying birds. Rising before dawn, he recorded species numbers, sometimes using nets to catch, count and release them. Over the years, numbers naturally rose and fell. But by 2012, a worrying trend appeared – bird populations were shrinking. It wasn't sudden, but a slow decline, generation by generation. By 2022, nearly half had disappeared.

3 Blake didn't need data to notice the change – he could hear it. The dawn chorus was quieter; the usual songs were gone. "Some species just don't seem to be here anymore," he said via a phone call from the research centre.

4 Bird populations have dropped in North America and Europe, mainly due to habitat loss, pollution, pesticides, and domestic cats, which kill up to 4 billion birds a year in the U.S. alone. But Tiputini was different – no roads, no farms, no industry yet the birds were still vanishing.

5 Other remote sites showed similar results. In Brazil, the Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project (BDFFP) found sharp declines when comparing current bird numbers to the 1980s. Ecologist Jared Wolfe, a BDFFP researcher, described the Amazon site as 'truly amazing', home to some of the world's oldest forests. Yet, bird populations there were also falling.

6 In Panama, scientists had been studying a 22,000-hectare rainforest since the 1970s. By 2020, the results were shocking: 70 per cent of species had declined, and 88 per cent had lost more than half their population. Some areas had seen "almost complete community collapse," Wolfe said.

7 For years, scientists searched for answers. Blake and ornithologist Bette A. Loiselle published a study on Tiputini's declines in 2015 but found no clear cause. Tests for diseases gave no answers. Pollution was unlikely due to how remote the area is."I suspect whatever is causing these declines is something much more widespread," Blake said.

8 The strongest suspect? Climate change. "There's very little else – at least that I know of – that has such large scale worldwide impacts," he said.

9 Recent research supports this idea. This week, Wolfe published a study in Science Advances linking rising temperatures to bird declines. Comparing BDFFP's bird populations with climate data, they found that hotter dry seasons lowered survival rates for 83 per cent of species. A 1°C rise in dry-season temperatures cut survival by 63 per cent.

10 Understanding how heat causes this decline is difficult. "These birds are very sensitive to small changes in temperature and rainfall," Wolfe explained. One major issue is food supply. When insects don't survive dry seasons or plants flower at different times, birds struggle to find food and raise their young. Within a few generations, the bird populations disappear.

11 "We've always believed that if you have large forests, they will protect everything," Blake said. "And they do help, but not enough." The bird declines suggest these places are more fragile than once thought.

12 For scientists who witness these changes for themselves, the emotional effect is difficult. "It's depressing," Blake said. "When we first arrived, we were amazed by the number of birds. Now, it's harder to stay excited when so little is left."

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3 Comprehension check

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

1. What was the first sign for John G. Blake that something was wrong at Tiputini?

   a. The birds were more difficult to catch.

   b. Bird populations were suddenly disappearing.

   c. There was a gradual decrease in bird numbers.

2. According to the article, what makes Tiputini different from other places where bird populations have declined?

   a. There are no industries or human inhabitants that live close to it.

   b. It has more diverse bird species.

   c. It experiences more extreme weather conditions.

3. When comparing current bird numbers to the 1970s in Panama, what did scientists discover?

   a. Bird populations had increased by 70 per cent.

   b. More than half of all species had disappeared.

   c. 88 per cent of species had lost over half their population.

4. What happened when scientists tried to find the cause of the bird population decline?

   a. They identified climate change as the cause.

   b. They found evidence of widespread disease.

   c. Initial investigations revealed clear explanations.

5. How does a 1°C increase in dry-season temperatures affect bird survival according to Wolfe's study?

   a. It reduces survival rates by 63 per cent.

   b. It affects around 83 per cent of species.

   c. It has no significant impact on bird species.

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6. What is one major way that temperature changes affect bird populations?

   a. It forces birds move to different areas.

   b. It affects their food supply.

   c. It prevents them from laying eggs.

4 Key language

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

compare	generate	rain	survive
ecology	low	spread	world

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

1. At the moment, researchers are _____ different bird populations to understand the effects of climate change.
2. In Egypt, including the Sahara Desert, the annual _____ is less than 50 mm.
3. Martha is an experienced _____ who studies the effects of pollution on river ecosystems.
4. Many cultural traditions are passed down from previous _____ to the next.
5. Spotify had around 675 million monthly users _____ in 2024.
6. Plastic waste has become a(n) _____ issue, affecting oceans and marine life all over the world.
7. Finding food and water is essential for the _____ of any animal.
8. Local shop owners have _____ their prices on essential items such as bread and milk to remain competitive.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Have you noticed any changes in the number of birds or their behaviour in your area? How could this be related to what happened at Tiputini?
- The researchers in the article feel sad about the birds' decline. How could emotions like this affect their work? Do you think emotions make scientific research easier or more difficult? Why?

6 In your own words

a. In pairs or small groups, research online to find a species of bird that has gone extinct or is critically endangered. Then:

- write a short description of the bird.
- list causes (both human-related and climate-related).
- outline what consequences for the local ecosystems this extinction has had (or what consequences the total extinction of a critically endangered species will have).

b. Share the information you found with your class.