

# THE URBAN BIRD CALL

NEW  
TITLE!



**WITHOUT ACTION, THIS  
WADING BIRD COULD VANISH:  
THE BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON**

**REMEMBERING THREE  
CHAMPIONS FOR BIRDS**





## MISSION & VISION

NYC Bird Alliance, formerly NYC Audubon, is a grassroots community that works for the protection of wild birds and habitat in the five boroughs, improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. NYC Bird Alliance envisions a day when birds and people in the five boroughs enjoy a healthy, livable habitat.

## COMMITMENT TO EQUITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY

NYC Bird Alliance believes all people have the right to a close connection to the natural world and the right to a healthy environment. Preserving our environment is only possible if we all feel that connection. We commit to building an equitable, diverse, inclusive, and accessible organization, dedicated to protecting nature for all of the City's people and its wild birds. For more information, visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/edia](http://go.nycbirdalliance.org/edia).

## THE URBAN BIRD CALL (FORMERLY THE URBAN AUDUBON)

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## PRESIDENT'S PERCH

By Michael Yuan,  
Board President



**D**uring my frequent visits to Brooklyn Bridge Park—my cherished birding patch—I've watched countless visitors pause along the Long Pond on Pier 1 to spot Black-crowned Night Herons in late summer and fall. One can make a game of counting the stocky, hunched wading birds, as more reveal themselves in the trees and around the edges of the pond. Whether people seek them or stumble upon them by chance, these herons are a source of delight, but their presence is not guaranteed.

Protecting birds like the Black-crowned Night Heron is central to NYC Bird Alliance's mission. This year, we are updating our strategic plan around the organization's three pillars—conservation, engagement, and advocacy—to strengthen our bird and habitat protection efforts. Through science, advocacy for effective solutions, and public engagement that connects New Yorkers of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds with the magic of birding, we are committed to making the City a safer, more welcoming place for birds and people.

In the face of headwinds, protecting birds is more critical than ever as we confront climate change and biodiversity crises. Without action, the bird populations we count today may not be there tomorrow. But with thoughtful planning and conservation, we can ensure that Black-crowned Night Herons—and all the birds that make our city special—continue to thrive.

I invite NYC Bird Alliance members to provide input that will guide our mission forward. (See Page 6 for more information.) And as always, I hope you connect with our work this spring: join us for a bird outing to experience migration firsthand, volunteer to protect birds from building collisions, or use your voice to support bird-friendly policies. I hope to see you in the field. ■



Michael Yuan (left), Tod Winston (center), and Dr. Shannon Curley (right) conduct a Harbor Herons survey on South Brother Island in New York Harbor.

© NYC Bird Alliance



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# BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON COULD VANISH

By Tod Winston, Urban Biodiversity Specialist and Birding Guide

**A**s a birding guide and a former leader of NYC Bird Alliance's annual Harbor Herons Nesting Survey, I know how the City's charismatic wading birds can inspire New Yorkers. The Black-crowned Night Heron is one of our most exciting residents, often seen hunting along the City's shores. Of the 10 species of long-legged wading birds that nest on the islands in New York's harbor, the Black-crowned Night Heron has long been the most abundant. Sadly, however, NYC Bird Alliance's scientists have determined that the species is in critical decline here and across the Northeast: According to recent analysis of our over four decades of research data, it may disappear entirely from the harbor as soon as 2035. Ten years from now.

Long-legged wading birds, including herons, egrets, and ibises, have not always been as common in our harbor as they are today. At the turn of the 19th century, these birds were hunted nearly to extinction for their beautiful breeding plumes, used to decorate ladies' hats. The first Audubon Society formed in Massachusetts to stop that slaughter, leading to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Though this probably saved birds like Great and Snowy Egrets from extinction, a diverse population of wading birds didn't return to nest in the harbor for decades.

"This handsome yet often overlooked bird has been key to the success story of herons returning to the New York-New Jersey Harbor," says Dr. Susan Elbin, NYC Bird Alliance's former director of conservation and science who oversaw the surveys from 2007 to 2019. The growth in the mid-1970s of breeding colonies on small islands near Staten Island followed passage of another landmark conservation law, the Clean Water Act of 1972. "Their population trends serve as key indicators of ecosystem health," Susan continues. "And now, with their continuing decline, the birds are telling us we need to take action to protect them and their habitat before it is too late."

NYC Bird Alliance (then NYC Audubon) began annual surveys of these birds in 1985, building decades of systematic population data. Though these surveys found that the birds' presence around the harbor might shift, their total number continued to climb into the early 1990s.

Analysis of our 40 years of data, however, revealed a significant decline in the total Harbor Herons population since 2000—notably among Black-crowned Night Herons, and to a similar extent, Glossy Ibises. (While also concerning, the decline in Glossy Ibis, a less abundant species here, is thought to be a natural contraction of its recently expanded range.) Further support is needed to research why Black-crowned Night Heron numbers have fallen. Likely possibilities include chemical pollution, predation, competition, declines in prey species, habitat loss, and climate change. But determining the actual causes will need more focused studies—requiring

resources that typically come from major research universities or state or federal wildlife agencies.

"Black-crowned Night Herons are in serious decline—but if we act now, we can help them recover," says Dr. Dustin Partridge, director of conservation and science. A first step, according to him, would be the establishment of Threatened or Endangered status for them in New York State to prevent further direct anthropogenic harm. The imminent scientific journal publication of NYC Bird Alliance's research findings, anchored by the data analysis performed by Harbor Herons survey lead researcher Dr. Shannon Curley, may bring the pressure needed to make that happen. Protected status would support needed local manage-

ment efforts, including pollutant control, habitat restoration, prevention of human disturbance, and predator management.

Time is critical if we are to save this once plentiful species. Pressure from conservation groups and the general public has brought about fundamental change before, saving millions of birds' lives. It is time to do it again.

"The Black-crowned Night Heron could be the Passenger Pigeon of our day and disappear into extinction, or it could become a conservation success story like the Bald Eagle," says Jessica Wilson, executive director. "Let's work together to make it a success story."

*To learn how you can help the Black-crowned Night Heron at this time, see page 4. To read more about this unique species and its habits, see the back cover. The Harbor Herons program began under the leadership of Peter Rhoades Mott, who passed away this past December (see page 7). ■*

*"Black-crowned Night Herons are in serious decline—but if we act now, we can help them recover"*



Data analysis by NYC Bird Alliance scientists predicts Black-crowned Night Heron will disappear from our harbor in the next 10 years without conservation action.

© Matt Cuda



# PROTECTING BIRDS AND HABITATS IN THE CITY'S FIVE BOROUGHES

## CONSERVATION UPDATES



*NYC Bird Alliance scientists work from the rooftops of Manhattan to the beaches of the Rockaways to collect data on wild bird populations and the habitats they need to thrive.*

### PROVIDING HABITAT WITH GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

NYC Bird Alliance's continues its pioneering multi-year study of Google's Manhattan green roofs, which we have documented hosting over 40 bird species during fall migration alone. As we enter our third year of this exciting collaboration, our team is expanding the scope of our research by monitoring insects (i.e., bird food) on these terraces this spring, which will help us assess the quality of these habitats available to birds. Do you work in, live in or manage a building that has green space? NYC Bird Alliance can help tell the sustainability story of your building. Please contact us at [green-roofs@nycbirdalliance.org](mailto:green-roofs@nycbirdalliance.org).

### MAKING THE CITY'S BUILDINGS SAFER FOR BIRDS

NYC Bird Alliance has worked with over 25 buildings across the City to implement bird-safe glass retrofits. Our recent data shows these efforts are working: at one recently retrofitted building, we estimate that the bird-safe glass

installed in fall 2023 protected over 60% of birds that would have otherwise collided with its previously-untreated glass last fall. We look forward to continuing to measure the efficacy of retrofits we have collaborated on in recent years and sharing how these interventions are saving an incredible number of birds each migration season.

### PROTECTING THE WATERBIRDS OF NY HARBOR

Similar to the Black-crowned Night Heron and other wading birds that rely on New York Harbor (see page 3), more than two-thirds of our state's American Oystercatcher population nests on the beaches of New York City. This spring, in addition to submitting a scientific study for publication detailing the challenges urban-nesting birds like the oystercatcher face, we are processing over 600,000 camera trap images—captured over the past two years—to quantify the main cause of nest loss in this important shorebird population. ■

## ADVOCACY UPDATES



*NYC Bird Alliance speaks up for birds and their habitats with advocacy efforts across the City.*

### BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERONS NEED YOUR VOICE

Have you noticed fewer Black-crowned Night Herons in your local park? Share your observations of these birds out in the field, or tell us why they matter to you. Your experiences can help us build support for their protection before it's too late. Send your stories to [bcnh@nycbirdalliance.org](mailto:bcnh@nycbirdalliance.org). (For more information on their decline, see page 3.)

### REDUCING COLLISIONS: LIGHTS OUT BILL UPDATE

For the past two years, Lights Out bills that would require privately-owned commercial and industrial buildings to turn off non-essential lights at night have been introduced in the New York City Council. With NYC Bird Alliance and our partners working to increase awareness of the need for bird-friendly legislation to reduce collisions with buildings, we hope that 2025 is the year for successful passage! We plan to work with the City Council this year to re-introduce the Lights Out bill, and significantly reduce the nearly quarter million bird deaths resulting from collisions with our city's buildings each year.

### PROTECTING HORSESHOE CRABS

Despite Governor Hochul's veto of the Horseshoe Crab Protection Act, which passed in the NY State Legislature last year, our grassroots advocacy efforts showed wide support for protecting this species. Our supporters' many phone calls, messages, and sharing of our action alert underscored how horseshoe crab eggs serve as a critical food source for migratory shorebirds, leading the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) to add two lunar harvest closures for the 2025 season. As the state Legislature now considers new harvest bans, we provided expert testimony for the NY State Assembly Hearing Regarding Horseshoe Management Practices. We'll continue to work with the Horseshoe Crab Recovery coalition to push the NYSDEC for more lunar closures. ■

### SPEAK UP FOR BIRDS

Sign up for Avian Advocates emails to receive the latest news on how you can help these critical initiatives.



## ENGAGEMENT UPDATES



*NYC Bird Alliance works to create the next generation of conservationists by instilling a love of birds and nature through hundreds of bird outings and events each year.*

### RECORD PARTICIPATION FOR A LANDMARK CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

The 125th Christmas Bird Count drew an extraordinary 700 community scientists to document birds and connect with nature at over two dozen locations across NYC Bird Alliance's count circle encompassing Manhattan, its surrounding islands, and parts of Northern New Jersey. Read highlights and view photos from an incredible day at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/cbc125](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/cbc125).

### MAKING BIRDING ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

NYC Bird Alliance's accessible birding tours are creating new paths to nature for New Yorkers of all abilities. Through tactile tools, adapted routes, and inclusive practices, bird guide Alexandra Wang is helping participants on her accessible birding tours build community and discover the joy of urban birding. In *The Urban Bird Call* online edition, Alex sheds light on her innovative approaches and shares inspiring stories from participants about the power of birds to make everyone feel welcome: [go.nycbirdalliance.org/alexwang](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/alexwang).

### SPRING PROGRAM REGISTRATION

**Friday, March 7:** our full calendar of spring events will be published at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/outings](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/outings).

**Monday, March 10 at 9am:** registration opens for members. Keep an eye out for special members-only outings and experiences as well!

**Monday, March 17 at 9am:** registration opens for non-members.

### WORLD MIGRATORY BIRD DAY: MAY 10

Every May and October we celebrate World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD), appreciating the winged wonders that travel thousands of miles on their migrations. This spring, WMBD falls on Saturday, May 10, and we will have a day packed with free events across the City, including at Brooklyn's Marine Park, Staten Island's Snug Harbor, the Bronx's Crotona Park, and more. Visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/wmbd](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/wmbd) to see more information.

### SPRING CLASSES AND OUTINGS

This spring, NYC Bird Alliance will host over 100 bird welcoming outings and classes to connect New Yorkers with nature and celebrate the colorful songbirds migrating through our city. We are offering outings across all five boroughs, including events in multiple languages and for all levels of physical accessibility.

### BLACK BIRDERS WEEK

Black Birders Week—started by BlackAFInSTEM in 2020 to raise the visibility of and showcase Black birders, scientists, and nature enthusiasts—will take place this year in late spring. Be on the lookout for information on events hosted by NYC Bird Alliance and our partners at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/bbw](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/bbw).

### SPRING FESTIVALS

This spring, join us at these engaging, free weekend festivals around the City. Enjoy great birding and family-friendly activities!

- Earth Day celebrations at Governors Island (April 19) and Earth Day Celebration at Carl Schurz Park (April 26)
- Horseshoe Crab Festival at Jamaica Bay (May 18)

For more information, please visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/festivals](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/festivals).

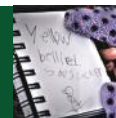
### COMMUNITY SCIENCE OPPORTUNITIES

Light and glass pose major threats to migratory birds as they travel through our city. You can help us collect data during migration by monitoring designated buildings for collisions. This opportunity requires a time commitment of up to one hour, one morning a week, from late March through early June. Sign up by March 16, and new volunteers must attend one of our training sessions held over Zoom. To learn more and register to volunteer this spring, visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/volunteer](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/volunteer). ■



Guide Alexandra Wang (pictured at far right) leads an accessible birding tour in Fort Tryon Park.





## FLACO'S LEGACY HIGHLIGHTS THREATS TO BIRDS

Flaco the Eurasian Eagle-Owl captured the hearts of New Yorkers from the moment he escaped the Central Park Zoo until his death in early 2024. While neither a wild bird nor a native one, the threats Flaco faced outside the zoo raised New Yorkers' awareness of the dangers to wild birds of building collisions and rodenticide poisoning. NYC Bird Alliance board member Christian Cooper has just published a new book *The Urban Owls: How Flaco and Friends Made the City Their Home*. Also, an exhibition at The New York Historical celebrates *The Year of Flaco* (through July 6) with photos by NYC Bird Alliance friends David Lei and Jacqueline Emery. Learn more about the exhibition in Suzanne Charlé's piece for *The Urban Bird Call* online edition at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/flaco](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/flaco).

## REMEMBERING THREE CHAMPIONS FOR BIRDS

NYC Bird Alliance is saddened to report the recent passing of three committed advocates for the City's birds and leaders of our organization.

Longtime organization leader **Peter Rhoades Mott** passed away in



© David Lei

The threats that Flaco faced during his time in the wild are the same that the City's native birds face everyday.

December 2024. A member of the organization's board of directors from 1985 to 2011, Peter served as president from 1994 to 1998 and from 2005 to 2009, and as interim executive director in 2001. One of the early champions of our now decades-long Harbor Herons study of the breeding birds of New York Harbor, Peter was a tireless advocate for protecting birds around the City. Read more about Peter at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/mott](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/mott).

Writer and journalist **Marie Winn** passed away in December 2024. Her articles and book about Pale Male, the City's first resident Red-tailed Hawk, inspired a generation of wildlife advocates. Read more about Marie at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/winn](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/winn).

Former NYC Bird Alliance board member and longtime supporter **Aline Euler** passed away in November 2024. Serving on the board of directors from 1996 to 2005, Aline was dedicated to protecting nature through environmental education, including service in leadership roles at Alley Pond Environmental Center in Queens. Read more about Aline's work at [bit.ly/eulerQNS](https://bit.ly/eulerQNS).

## SAVE THE DATE FOR OUR ANNUAL MEETING: JUNE 4

Join us on Wednesday, June 4 for our Annual Meeting of members. At this meeting, NYC Bird Alliance members will elect board directors and officers. NYC Bird Alliance's leaders will also share an update on our conservation, engagement, and advocacy efforts to protect wild birds and to engage New Yorkers in enjoying and stewarding nature. Information about the meeting location, as well as proxy ballots, will be sent by mail and email in May.

## HELP GUIDE OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

NYC Bird Alliance has launched a strategic planning process to guide our work in the years ahead. This effort will ensure we protect the City's birds and habitats while expanding our impact. We're engaging board members, staff, members, partners, and supporters to gather insights and identify opportunities to strengthen our research, programs, advocacy, and community connections. Be part of this important dialogue: please take our survey at [go.nycbirdalliance.org/spsurvey](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/spsurvey) to provide valuable feedback on NYC Bird Alliance's mission, vision, and values. ■



© Betty Hamilton

Former Executive Director Marcia Fowle and Peter Rhoades Mott at an event in Jamaica Bay, 1997.

# LEAVE A LEGACY FOR THE CITY'S BIRDS

© Jeremy Sato



Pale Male (1990-2023) left an indelible impact on New York City's birding community.

Secure the future of New York City's birds and enjoy potential tax benefits—some options even provide income for life. By making a planned gift, you're ensuring that birds continue to thrive in our City for generations to come. Below are some ways to make a lasting impact.

## INCLUDE NYC BIRD ALLIANCE IN YOUR WILL OR TRUST

Simply designate "New York City Bird Alliance, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010" as a beneficiary in your will or irrevocable trust. Your bequest can be adjusted at any time.

## NAME NYC BIRD ALLIANCE AS A BENEFICIARY

Consider listing NYC Bird Alliance as a residual or co-beneficiary of your retirement account, bank account, or life insurance policy—an easy and impactful way to support bird conservation.

## ALREADY INCLUDED US IN YOUR ESTATE PLANS?

If you've already included birds in your plans, we'd love to hear from you! If your documents still reference "NYC Audubon," rest assured—our name changed in June 2024, but no updates are required on your part.

To explore your planned giving options, contact Matthew Coody, director of development, at 646.502.9611 or [mcoody@nycbirdalliance.org](mailto:mcoody@nycbirdalliance.org). ■

# ENJOY YOUR MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

**Thanks for being part of our flock. As a NYC Bird Alliance member, you enjoy:**

- 30% discount on most outings and classes
- Invitations to free members-only bird outings and other special events
- Early registration for most outings and classes (Spring events early registration for members opens March 10, 9am. See page 5.)
- And more!

And most importantly, your membership helps NYC Bird Alliance protect our city's wild birds. To view all benefits by membership level, visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/benefits](https://go.nycbirdalliance.org/benefits). ■



© Serena Candiani

NYC Bird Alliance members look for a warbler during a Central Park Evening Birding outing led by naturalist Gabriel Willow.





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**NYC BIRD  
ALLIANCE**  
FORMERLY NYC AUDUBON

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# BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

By Kellye Rosenheim, Birding Guide and Former NYC Bird Alliance Director of Development

As a sometime leader of kids' bird outings, I have a particular fondness for the Black-crowned Night Heron. Getting everyone's eyes onto flitting songbirds can be a challenge, so I rejoice when I see a big, stocky, mostly white heron roosting on a branch near the water. Because we're out in the daytime, this bird is not going to move. We all can admire its luminous white breast, slaty gray wing feathers, long head plumes in breeding season and (if the bird is awake) crimson red eye.

This is one of the most widespread herons in the world—and for now, one of the most abundant in New York Harbor. A chunky, short-legged, short-necked bird, with a large head, it's the only heron in our area with a black cap and dark back, wings, rump, and tail. Both sexes look alike. And in the breeding season, both acquire plumes. Juveniles sport mottled brown and white plumage.

Though sometimes active during the day, the birds prefer to feed at night as their name implies. You'll see them poised in a "grumpy old man" crouch near the edge of a weedy pond, waiting to pounce. These opportunistic feeders eat a variety of organisms, using a number of techniques; sometimes even tools (such as manipulating bread to attract fish).

Their call is distinctive, a slightly nasal squawk. Colloquially, people have called it the Qua bird, the Quock, and the Squawk. Ornithologist Edward Howe Forbush describes its call as "Ordinarily a hoarse, abrupt quock; when disturbed on



This "grumpy" Black-crowned Night Heron demonstrates its signature hunting pose, a motionless stance for ambushing fish in shallow waters.

its breeding grounds, a variety of harsh squawks and croaks; a loud wock-o-wock-wock."

In years past, the New York City rookery, like many in our region, had thousands of nests. "NYC has been home to the largest population of Black-crowned Night Herons in the Northeast," says Dr. Dustin Partridge, NYC Bird Alliance's director of conservation and science. "These birds are quintessential New Yorkers."

Now these once ubiquitous birds are facing steep population declines. Learn more on page 3 about this alarming discovery and what is needed to help these herons survive in New York Harbor. ■

**THERE'S MORE ONLINE! DIGITAL URBAN BIRD CALL STORIES**

Visit [go.nycbirdalliance.org/digital-ubc](http://go.nycbirdalliance.org/digital-ubc) to find more bird-filled stories.