

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the unprecedented decline in global biodiversity, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

The UK is officially one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world – ranking an abysmal 189th out of 218 assessed – so the frightening statistics in the latest *State of Nature Report* (The Current State of Nature, November 2019) come as no surprise. We may purport to be a nature-loving country, but our wildlife populations continue to decline.

Sadly, the same is true around the world. We are witnessing an unprecedented decline in global biodiversity: our planet has lost 60 per cent, on average, of vertebrate animal populations, and nearly half of its natural ecosystems since 1970.

Birds are a good example. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the skies are emptying. A recent comprehensive survey estimates that North America has lost a shocking 29 per cent of its bird populations in the same period. That's almost three billion fewer birds than there used to be half a century ago. The numbers are broadly comparable in many parts of Europe – bird numbers across France, for example, have declined by a third in the past 15 years.

We don't need scientific surveys to tell us what we can see with our own eyes. There are conspicuously fewer birds around than there were. But what they do tell us is that the commoner species are being hit the hardest.

This is the crux of the problem. The ramifications of swinging a wrecking ball through the Earth's biosphere are becoming patently clear: losing billions of individuals is far more worrying than losing dozens or even hundreds of species.

Think about it. In any given ecosystem, a small number of species are relatively common while a greater number are relatively rare. The common ones make up a small proportion of the biodiversity, but they define the structure, character and dynamics of the ecosystem. They are vital for controlling pests, pollinating flowers, spreading seeds, regenerating forests, and so on.

But conservationists have been slow to keep up. It's understandable, in a way. Resources are severely limited and we've had to prioritise. That has meant focusing on endangered species – which, by definition, are at most risk of extinction – and paying less attention to the more common species. And to be fair, the impact on commoner species has been less obvious. There are 24 million eastern meadowlarks in North America, for

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example, but that apparent abundance obscures the fact that 74 million have already gone.

Now that we have the cold hard facts, what can we do about it? The trick is to break it down into manageable parts.

Take birds in Europe. Most catastrophic declines have been on farmland (which isn't surprising, given that two-fifths of the land area is devoted to farming). Europe has lost 300 million farmland birds in the 30-year period 1980–2010. Farmland birds are in freefall.

The problem is agricultural intensification and, in particular, the common agricultural policy. This system of subsidies paid to EU farmers – designed to guarantee maximum levels of production – provides a perverse incentive for farmers to use all available land, and lots of harmful chemicals, to grow more crops. It is one of the most powerful drivers of environmental destruction in Europe.

Most agriculture ministers are in a state of denial, pushing for business as usual. Our challenge is to educate them: a thriving natural environment underpins our ability to grow food. All they have to do is to pay subsidies for protecting wildlife and ecosystems, alongside food production, and the problem can be solved. It is politicians who need to catch up. They're standing in the way of common sense. 🗣️

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Humans are causing the decline of common species, such as the eastern meadowlark.