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*Whimbrels migrated through Hurricane Irene in 2011.*

## **BIRDS AND HURRICANES**

What happens to birds in hurricanes? We know quite well what happens to humans, for hurricane paths are followed 24/7 on the news, television, newspapers, and internet. We are inundated with scenes of devastation, flooding, windblown damage, power outages, displaced and rescued residents, death tolls, and constantly reminded of the millions/billions of dollars recovery will require. But have you ever seen any mention of the plight of birds that go through the same hurricanes, without shelters to evacuate to, with their habitat being destroyed or changed beyond recognition, their food supply obliterated, and with only their wits to get them through?

As with humans, it is only after the hurricane has passed through, that we are able to survey the scene and assess the damage. But even then, bird reports don't make the national consciousness or news unless the bird, such as an enterprising juvenile Cooper's Hawk, seeks shelter in the back seat of a taxi cab. (See reference and video below.)

Migrating birds are able to sense air pressure changes and apparently can speed up or delay their migration schedule to their best advantage, avoiding disaster. But some species, such as a number of radio tagged Whimbrels migrating through Hurricane Irene in 2011, flew right through the storm. Some made it through successfully; others survived the storm, only to fall to hunter's guns on Guadeloupe Island. On another occasion a flock of Chimney Swifts (*above right*) got caught up in a hurricane while migrating and became windblown transplants to England, where they delighted birders.



Unfortunately, most did not survive the relocation, as over 600 were later found dead. In reality, very little is known about the survival rate of migrating birds confronted by a hurricane. It is most likely that a great many do not survive.

Resident, non-migratory birds have the same need to survive the hurricane as we humans have. They must find a safe haven in the storm: a cavity in a tree works for most cavity nesting birds, unless the tree is blown down; or a sheltered spot out of the wind and rain must be located, just as humans must find. However, there is anecdotal evidence that some species are severely impacted by hurricanes. Prior to the 2004 hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne, here in St Lucie County, Eurasian Collared Doves (*left*) were the most prevalent and dominant dove species. After the two hurricanes, their numbers were greatly reduced, and even now have not, in my opinion, recovered to the pre-hurricane years.

A family of Florida Scrub Jays that for years before the same hurricanes delighted birders on Savanna Road in Fort Pierce,

disappeared with the hurricanes and have not been found in that same location ever since that time, even though the habitat has recovered and appears unchanged in the interim. Sadly, it has been documented that every one of the 44 known Snail Kite nests between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades was destroyed by hurricane Irma this summer. The only good news is that the hurricanes occurred after their breeding season was pretty well completed.

But it is the unfortunate hurricane blown birds, far from their normal range and locations, that excite and delight birders, when relocated, whether they survive to return home or not. After this summer's spate of hurricanes, a badly windblown first year Painted Bunting (*right, well-plumaged bird depicted here*) was found on Monhegan Island in Maine; a Gray Kingbird (*below*) was found in Cumberland County, New Jersey; a Limpkin (*below right*) was found in Virginia; and Roseate Spoonbills and Woodstorks were found in several locations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania; all far north of their usual Florida and deep south haunts.



While relatively little is known about the impact of Harvey, Irma, Jose, Maria and Nate on the fate of birds, we can easily extrapolate the devastation we see on humans in affected areas and assume the loss of habitat, cover, food sources, and roosting and nesting sites must have an equivalent effect on birds.

Heartrending as the images from Barbuda, Puerto Rico, Florida and Texas are, depicting human suffering; similar sufferings by wildlife and birds are unreported. We may never know the full impact in either case. And, as I write these words, equally unnerving reports of loss and suffering are preeminent on the daily news of the wild fires in California, which are certainly having a similar impact on humans, wildlife and birds, differing only in that the California catastrophe is wind and fire, rather than wind and water. For many humans and birds, life will never be the same.



For more details on birds migrating through hurricanes and juvenile Cooper's Hawk/taxi video, see: [www.forbes.com/sites/grrlscientist/2017/09/08/where-do-birds-go-in-a-hurricane/#2ea48459254a](http://www.forbes.com/sites/grrlscientist/2017/09/08/where-do-birds-go-in-a-hurricane/#2ea48459254a)

[www.birdscaribbean.org/2017/10/bird-dispatches-from-the-hurricane-front-lines](http://www.birdscaribbean.org/2017/10/bird-dispatches-from-the-hurricane-front-lines)

For the Snail Kite report, see: [www.audubon.org/news/hurricane-irma-destroyed-all-everglade-snail-kite-nests-lake-okeechobee](http://www.audubon.org/news/hurricane-irma-destroyed-all-everglade-snail-kite-nests-lake-okeechobee)

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