

C Connections

JANUARY – MARCH 2009

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF MASS AUDUBON

Inside This Issue

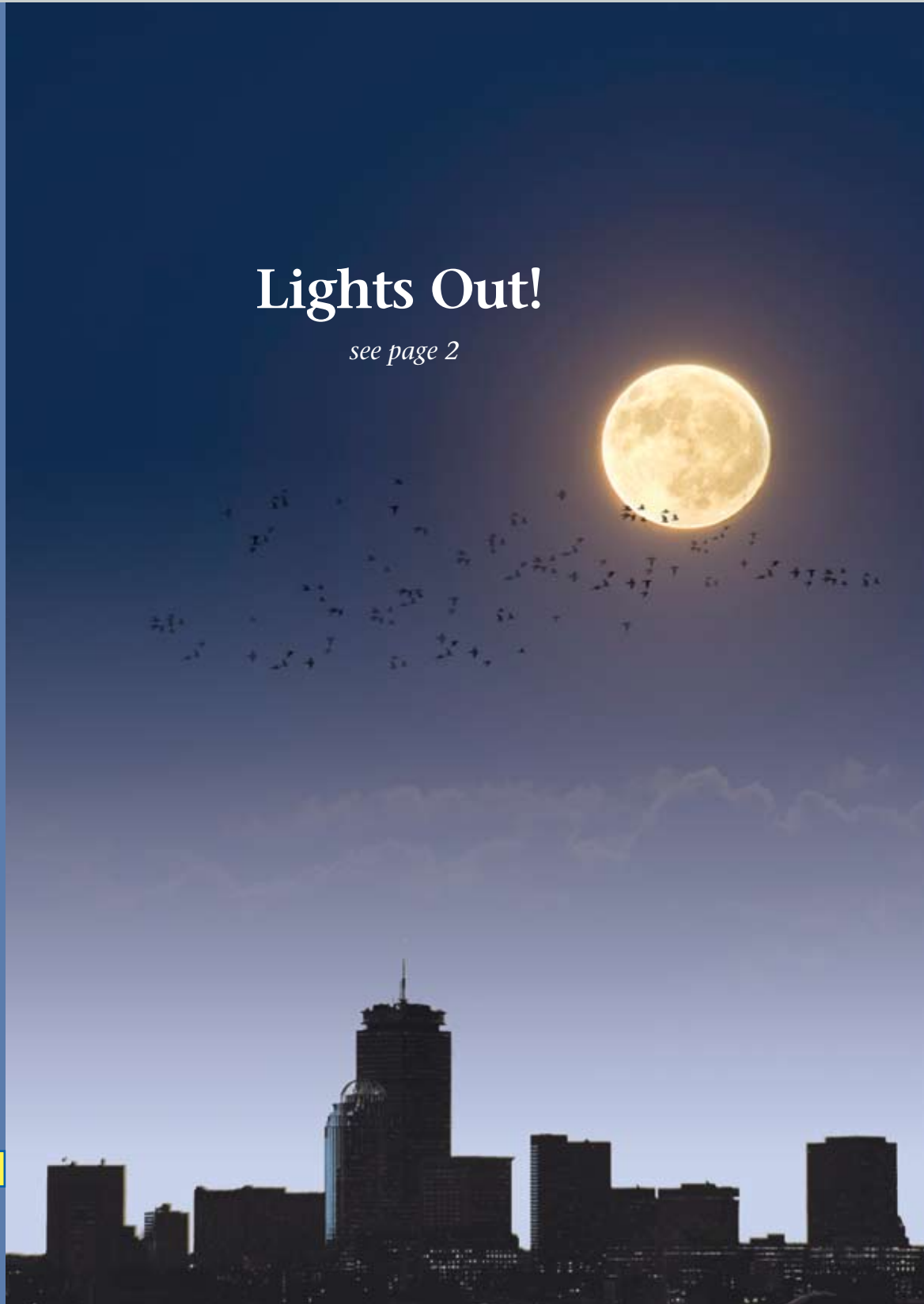
- 2 Kill the Lights,
Save the Birds
- 5 Hope for the Housatonic
- 9 New Tools in the Land
Conservation Toolbox
- 10 More Than Just a Walk
on the Beach

Inside Every Issue

- 4 Birding Beyond
the Backyard:
***Disappearing Act —
The American Kestrel***
- 6 ready, set, Go Outside!
Ice is COOL
- 7 Exploring the Nature
of Massachusetts:
Winter Woodlands
- 11 The Natural Inquirer:
Wolf Moon

Lights Out!

see page 2



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Connections is published three times each year in January, April, and August.

Please recycle this newsletter.

Mass Audubon works to protect the nature of Massachusetts for people and wildlife. Together with more than 100,000 members, we care for 33,000 acres of conservation land, provide educational programs for 200,000 children and adults annually, and advocate for sound environmental policies at local, state, and federal levels. Mass Audubon's mission and actions have expanded since our beginning in 1896 when our founders set out to stop the slaughter of birds for use on women's fashions. Today we are the largest conservation organization in New England. Our statewide network of 45 wildlife sanctuaries welcomes visitors of all ages and serves as the base for our conservation, education, and advocacy work. To support these important efforts, call 800-AUDUBON (283-8266) or visit www.massaudubon.org.

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Kill the Lights,

Save the Birds

by Chris Leahy, Gerard A. Bertrand Chair of Natural History and Field Ornithology at Mass Audubon

First you must try to imagine a natural occurrence so astonishing, so improbable, that for centuries—until the invention of radar and the advent of systematic bird banding banished all doubt—few people had the audacity to suggest the truth: the virtually global, nearly constant phenomenon of bird migration. On cues from the seasonal climate, billions of warblers, vireos, thrushes, and orioles—following precise itineraries etched in the genes of their particular species—leave behind a familiar winter or summer home, launching themselves thousands of feet into the night sky. Hence, using the stars, the earth's magnetic field, and the prevailing winds, they find their way to predetermined destinations on another continent thousands of miles away.

Now picture a “wave” of these migrants—tens of thousands of birds of dozens of species—making their way north, buffeted between the capricious weather fronts that keep meteorologists constantly guessing in April and May. Migrants following a coastal route face a heightened danger because the prevailing southwest winds push the colorful swarms toward the ocean's edge. If the cloud ceiling comes down while the migrants are still aloft, the avian throng will lose some of its most valuable navigational aids in dense fog. Then some may wander eastward and drown in the sea.

But worse still, tens of thousands of these vulnerable travelers will be drawn to the blinding light, reflective glass, and mazelike canyon landscape that is a large city at night. In their panic, some of the birds will die in collisions with skyscraper windows. Perhaps the largest number, however, will perish from exhaustion as they circle around the lit towers, struggling to escape.

Boston was one of the first cities to recognize the significance of the threat posed by brightly lit cities to migratory birds. In the 1960s, Henry Wiggin, a passionate birdwatcher and corporate executive with an office in the Back Bay, was appalled by the large number of birds he saw trapped, injured, or dead in the plaza around his office tower during the peaks of spring and fall migration. Working with Mass Audubon and the owners of the office building, he arranged for the deployment of custom-made netting that kept the disoriented birds away from the deadly windows.



Yellow-rumped warbler



Magnolia warbler



Since then, studies undertaken in Toronto and Chicago have shown Wiggin’s fears to be well founded. Conservatively estimated, some five million birds pass through the larger cities of eastern North America during each migratory season, and as many as 1,000 birds *per major building* die, mainly as a result of being attracted to and disoriented by city lights.

But there is some good news buried in the bad news that brightly lit big cities are avian death traps: namely, we can save tens of thousands of birds in each city each spring and fall by simply turning off (or at least turning down) the lights. Concerned citizens of Toronto led the charge by founding the Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP) in 1993, with a mission to “safeguard migratory birds in the urban environment.” This led to the formation of Lights Out Toronto, a partnership involving environmental groups, city government, and building owners to minimize bird mortality

and in the bargain to cut energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, save money, and reduce light pollution.

There are now Lights Out programs in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis. Last fall, Mass Audubon joined Mayor Thomas Menino in founding Lights Out Boston. “With his commitment to reduce Boston’s greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050 and other initiatives to make Boston one of the world’s greenest cities, Mayor Menino has shown extraordinary leadership,” says Jack Clarke, Mass Audubon’s director of Public Policy and Government Relations, “and we are proud to be a founding partner with him of Lights Out Boston.”

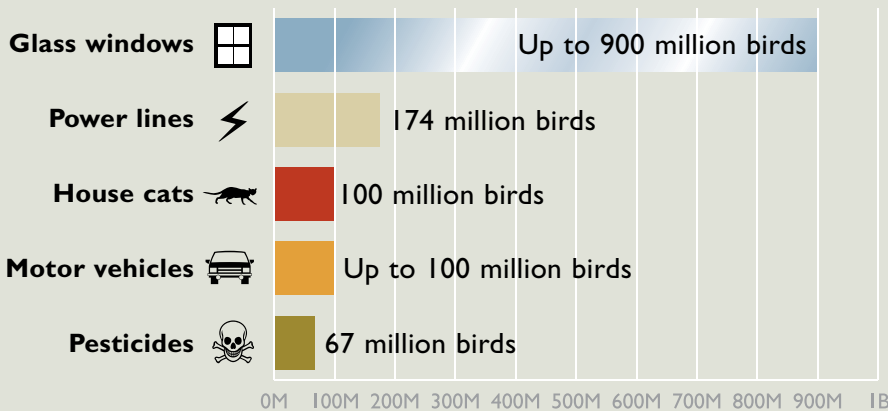
Major building owners in Boston are enthusiastic about the partnership, with 34 buildings already signed on to the program—more than any other city in the US. Shay Sims, vice president and partner of CB Richard Ellis, led the effort

to coordinate support on this initiative. “The core group of building owners/managers supporting Lights Out Boston represents millions of square feet of high-rise office space in the city of Boston,” says Sims. “Like the Mayor and Mass Audubon, we are committed to saving energy and improving the environment.”

We know that Lights Out programs work. A study of a single office tower in Chicago showed that bird mortality was reduced by 80 percent when architectural and window lighting was turned off during peak migration periods. Based on its success to date, Mass Audubon looks forward to expanding its partnership with the city of Boston and commercial property owners and managers. We also hope to implement a monitoring program to track results over time. Finally, we plan to partner with other cities throughout greater Boston and the Northeast to ensure safer passage for migratory birds. The dicey coastal weather is more than enough for our avian friends to contend with during their remarkable journey.

Top Hits for Birds

Modern living takes its toll on birds, as noted by these estimated annual bird deaths in North America. Can you help save a bird’s life by adding an outside screen or a decal in the shape of a hawk to large windows, or keeping pet cats indoors?



Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service, Smithsonian

To learn more about the Lights Out program and what you can do to support it, visit our website. There, you’ll find a list of frequently asked questions, resources for building participants, and tips for what homeowners can do to help birds avoid collisions with windows in homes as well as to reduce personal energy use.

Find all this and more at:

www.massaudubon.org/lightsout