Birds and Climate Change

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area

Background

Birds are useful indicators of ecological change because they are highly mobile and generally conspicuous. As climate in a particular place changes, suitability may worsen for some species and improve for others. These changes in climate may create the potential for local extirpation or new colonization. **This brief summarizes projected changes in climate suitability by mid-century for birds at Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (hereafter, the River) under two climate change scenarios (see Wu et al. 2018 for full results, and Langham et al. 2015 for more information regarding how climate suitability is characterized).** The high-emissions pathway (RCP8.5) represents a future in which little action is taken to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases. The low-emissions pathway (RCP2.6) is a best-case scenario of aggressive efforts to reduce emissions. These emissions pathways are globally standardized and established by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for projecting future climate change. The findings below are model-based projections of how species distributions may change in response to climate change. A 10-km buffer was applied to each park to match the spatial resolution of the species distribution models (10 x 10 km), and climate suitability was taken as the average of all cells encompassed by the park and buffer.

IMPORTANT

This study focuses exclusively on changing climatic conditions for birds over time. But projected changes in climate suitability are not definitive predictions of future species ranges or abundances. Numerous other factors affect where species occur, including habitat quality, food abundance, species adaptability, and the availability of microclimates (see Caveats). Therefore, managers should consider changes in climate suitability alongside these other important influences.

We report trends in climate suitability for all species identified as currently present at the River based on both NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program data and eBird observation data (2016), plus those species for which climate at the River is projected to become suitable in the future (Figure 1 & Table 1). This brief provides park-specific projections whereas Wu et al. (2018), which did not incorporate park-specific species data and thus may differ from this brief, provides system-wide comparison and conclusions.

Results

Climate change is expected to alter the bird community at the River, with greater impacts under the high-emissions pathway than under the low-emissions pathway (Figure 1). Among the species likely to be found at the River today, climate suitability in summer under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 21, remain stable for 30, and worsen for 12 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 14 species in summer, potentially resulting in extirpation of those species from the River (e.g., Figure 2). Climate is projected to become suitable in summer for 14 species not found at the River today, potentially resulting in local colonization. Climate suitability in winter under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 12, remain stable for 22, and worsen for 2 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 2 species in winter, potentially resulting in extirpation from the River. Climate is projected to become suitable in winter for 31 species not found at the River today, potentially resulting in local colonization.

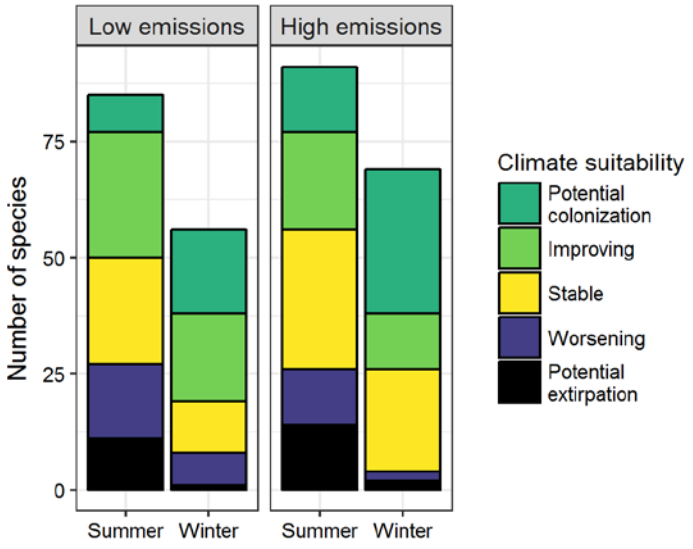

Figure 1. Projected changes in climate suitability for birds at the River, by emissions pathway and season.

Results (continued)

Potential Turnover Index

Potential bird species turnover for the River between the present and 2050 is 0.18 in summer (26th percentile across all national parks) and 0.17 in winter (21st percentile) under the high-emissions pathway. Potential species turnover declines to 0.12 in summer and 0.09 in winter under the low-emissions pathway. Turnover index was calculated based on the theoretical proportions of potential extirpations and potential colonizations by 2050 relative to today (as reported in Wu et al. 2018), and therefore assumes that all potential extirpations and colonizations are realized. According to this index, no change would be represented as 0, whereas a complete change in the bird community would be represented as 1.

Climate Sensitive Species

The River is or may become home to 4 species that are highly sensitive to climate change across their range (i.e., they are projected to lose climate suitability in over 50% of their current range in North America in summer and/or winter by 2050; Table 1; Langham et al. 2015). While the River may serve as an important refuge for 3 of these climate-sensitive species, one, the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), might be extirpated from the River in summer by 2050.

Figure 2. Although currently found at the River, suitable climate for the American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*) may cease to occur here in summer by 2050, potentially resulting in local seasonal extirpation. Photo by John Benson/Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

Management Implications

Parks differ in potential colonization and extirpation rates, and therefore different climate change adaptation strategies may apply. **Under the high-emissions pathway, Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area falls within the low change group.** Parks anticipating low change can best support landscape-scale bird conservation by emphasizing habitat restoration, maintaining natural disturbance regimes, and reducing other stressors. Furthermore, park managers have an opportunity to focus on supporting the 3 species that are highly sensitive to climate change across their range (Table 1; Langham et al. 2015) but for which the park is a potential refuge. Monitoring to identify changes in bird communities will inform the selection of appropriate management responses.

Caveats

The species distribution models included in this study are based solely on climate variables (i.e., a combination of annual and seasonal measures of temperature and precipitation), which means there are limits on their interpretation. Significant changes in climate suitability, as measured here, will not always result in a species response, and all projections should be interpreted as potential trends. Multiple other factors mediate responses to climate change, including habitat availability, ecological processes that affect demography, biotic interactions that inhibit and facilitate species' colonization or extirpation, dispersal capacity, species' evolutionary adaptive capacity, and phenotypic plasticity (e.g., behavioral adjustments). Ultimately, models can tell us where to focus our concern and which species are most likely to be affected, but monitoring is the only way to validate these projections and should inform any on-the-ground conservation action.

More Information

For more information, including details on the methods, please see the scientific publication (Wu et al. 2018) and the project overview brief, and visit the NPS Climate Change Response Program website.

References

eBird Basic Dataset (2016) Version: ebd_relAug-2016. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York.

Langham et al. (2015) Conservation Status of North American Birds in the Face of Future Climate Change. PLOS ONE.

Wu et al. (2018) Projected avifaunal responses to climate change across the U.S. National Park System. PLOS ONE.

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Species Projections

Table 1. Climate suitability projections by 2050 under the high-emissions pathway for all birds currently present at the River based on both NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program data and eBird observation data, plus those species for which climate at the River is projected to become suitable in the future. "Potential colonization" indicates that climate is projected to become suitable for the species, whereas "potential extirpation" indicates that climate is suitable today but projected to become unsuitable. Omitted species were either not modeled due to data deficiency or were absent from the I&M and eBird datasets. Observations of late-season migrants may result in these species appearing as present in the park when they may only migrate through. Species are ordered according to taxonomic groups, denoted by alternating background shading.

*** Species in top and bottom 10th percentile of absolute change**

^ Species that are highly climate sensitive

- Species not found or found only occasionally, and not projected to colonize by 2050

x Species not modeled in this season

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Cackling/Canada Goose	x	Stable
Mallard	Potential extirpation^	-
Blue-winged Teal	-	Potential colonization
Common Goldeneye	-	Potential colonization
Red-breasted Merganser	-	Potential colonization^
Ruffed Grouse	x	Potential extirpation
Wild Turkey	x	Potential extirpation
Eared Grebe	-	Potential colonization
Double-crested Cormorant	-	Potential colonization
American White Pelican	-	Potential colonization
Great Blue Heron	Improving*	-
Great Egret	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Little Blue Heron	Potential colonization	-
Cattle Egret	Potential colonization	-
Green Heron	Improving*	-
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	Potential colonization	-
Black Vulture	Improving	-
Turkey Vulture	x	Stable
Mississippi Kite	Potential colonization	-
Red-shouldered Hawk	Improving	Improving
Red-tailed Hawk	Stable	Stable
Killdeer	Stable	-
Greater Yellowlegs	-	Potential colonization
Least Sandpiper	-	Potential colonization
American Woodcock	-	Improving
Forster's Tern	-	Potential colonization

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Rock Pigeon	Stable	-
Eurasian Collared-Dove	-	Potential colonization
Mourning Dove	Stable	Stable
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Improving	-
Greater Roadrunner	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Barn Owl	-	Potential colonization
Eastern Screech-Owl	x	Stable
Barred Owl	x	Improving
Chimney Swift	Improving	-
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Improving	-
Belted Kingfisher	Stable	-
Red-headed Woodpecker	Improving*	-
Red-bellied Woodpecker	Improving	Stable
Downy Woodpecker	Stable	Stable
Hairy Woodpecker	Potential extirpation	Stable
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	-	Potential colonization
Northern Flicker	Stable	Stable
Pileated Woodpecker	Worsening	Stable
Eastern Wood-Pewee	Worsening	-
Acadian Flycatcher	Worsening	-
Eastern Phoebe	Stable	Improving
Great Crested Flycatcher	Improving*	-
Eastern Kingbird	Stable	-
Loggerhead Shrike	Potential colonization	-
White-eyed Vireo	Improving	Potential colonization
Bell's Vireo	Potential colonization	-
Yellow-throated Vireo	Stable	-
Red-eyed Vireo	Worsening	-
Blue Jay	Improving	Stable

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
American Crow	Stable	Stable
Horned Lark	Stable	-
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	Improving	-
Purple Martin	Improving*	-
Tree Swallow	Potential extirpation	-
Barn Swallow	Stable	-
Cliff Swallow	Potential colonization	-
Carolina Chickadee	Stable	Improving
Tufted Titmouse	Stable	Improving
White-breasted Nuthatch	Worsening*	Stable
Brown-headed Nuthatch	Potential colonization^	-
Brown Creeper	-	Worsening*
House Wren	Potential extirpation	Potential colonization
Pacific/Winter Wren	-	Improving
Sedge Wren	-	Potential colonization
Marsh Wren	-	Potential colonization
Carolina Wren	Stable	Improving
Bewick's Wren	-	Potential colonization
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Stable	-
Golden-crowned Kinglet	-	Stable
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	-	Improving
Eastern Bluebird	Improving	Improving
Hermit Thrush	-	Stable
Wood Thrush	Worsening*	-
American Robin	Potential extirpation	Stable
Gray Catbird	-	Potential colonization
Brown Thrasher	Stable	-
Northern Mockingbird	Improving	-

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
European Starling	Potential extirpation	-
American Pipit	-	Potential colonization
Sprague's Pipit	-	Potential colonization
Cedar Waxwing	Potential extirpation	-
Chestnut-collared Longspur	-	Potential colonization
Smith's Longspur	-	Potential colonization
Ovenbird	Potential extirpation	-
Worm-eating Warbler	Worsening*	-
Black-and-white Warbler	Stable	-
Swainson's Warbler	Improving	-
Orange-crowned Warbler	-	Potential colonization
Kentucky Warbler	Stable	-
Common Yellowthroat	Worsening	Potential colonization
Hooded Warbler	Stable	-
American Redstart	Potential extirpation	-
Northern Parula	Stable	-
Pine Warbler	Improving*^	-
Yellow-rumped Warbler	-	Improving
Yellow-throated Warbler	Worsening	-
Prairie Warbler	Stable	-
Black-throated Green Warbler	Potential extirpation	-
Yellow-breasted Chat	Improving	-
Eastern Towhee	Stable	x
Bachman's Sparrow	Potential colonization	Potential colonization

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Chipping Sparrow	Potential extirpation	-
Field Sparrow	Stable	Improving
Vesper Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Lark Sparrow	Potential colonization	-
Grasshopper Sparrow	Stable	-
LeConte's Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Song Sparrow	Potential extirpation	Stable
Lincoln's Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
White-throated Sparrow	-	Stable
Dark-eyed Junco	-	Stable
Scarlet Tanager	Worsening*	-
Northern Cardinal	Improving	Stable
Blue Grosbeak	Stable	-
Indigo Bunting	Improving	-
Painted Bunting	Potential colonization	-
Red-winged Blackbird	Worsening	-
Eastern Meadowlark	Stable	-
Brewer's Blackbird	-	Potential colonization
Common Grackle	Worsening	-
Great-tailed Grackle	Potential colonization	-
Brown-headed Cowbird	Stable	-
Orchard Oriole	Stable	-
House Finch	Potential extirpation	-
Purple Finch	-	Stable
Pine Siskin	-	Stable
American Goldfinch	Potential extirpation	Worsening