Birds and Climate Change

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Bridges National Monument

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 Natural Bridges National Monument (hereafter, the Monument) 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 Monument based on both NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program data and eBird observation data (2016), plus those species for which climate at the Monument 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 Monument, 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 Monument today, climate suitability in summer under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 10, remain stable for 25 (e.g., Figure 2), and worsen for 3 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 10 species in summer, potentially resulting in extirpation of those species from the Monument. Climate is projected to become suitable in summer for 22 species not found at the Monument today, potentially resulting in local colonization. Climate suitability in winter under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 13, remain stable for 4, and worsen for 2 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 3 species in winter, potentially resulting in extirpation from the Monument. Climate is projected to become suitable in winter for 43 species not found at the Monument today, potentially resulting in local colonization.

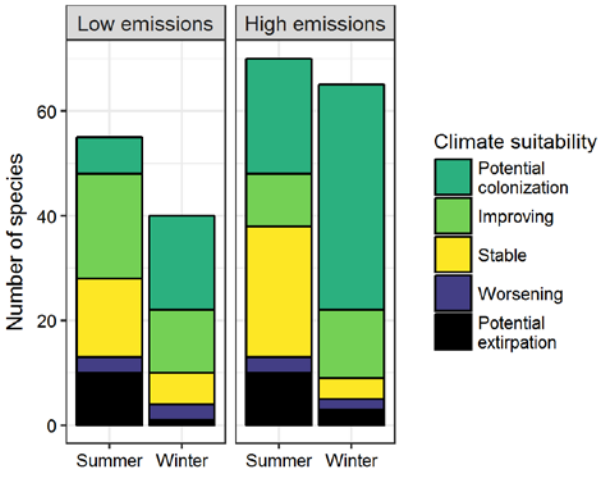

Figure 1. Projected changes in climate suitability for birds at the Monument, by emissions pathway and season.

Results (continued)

Potential Turnover Index

Potential bird species turnover for the Monument between the present and 2050 is 0.32 in summer (56th percentile across all national parks) and 0.26 in winter (39th percentile) under the high-emissions pathway. Potential species turnover declines to 0.23 in summer and 0.13 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 Monument is or may become home to 6 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 Monument may serve as an important refuge for 4 of these climate-sensitive species, 2 might be extirpated from the Monument in at least one season by 2050.

Figure 2. Climate at the Monument in summer is projected to remain suitable for the Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*) through 2050. Photo by Becky Matsubara/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, Natural Bridges National Monument falls within the high turnover group.** Parks anticipating high turnover can focus on actions that increase species' ability to respond to environmental change, such as increasing the amount of potential habitat, working with cooperating agencies and landowners to improve habitat connectivity for birds across boundaries, managing the disturbance regime, and possibly more intensive management actions. Furthermore, park managers have an opportunity to focus on supporting the 4 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.

Contacts

Gregor Schuurman, Ph.D.
Ecologist, NPS Climate Change Response Program
970-267-7211, gregor_schuurman@nps.gov

Joanna Wu
Biologist, National Audubon Society
415-644-4610, science@audubon.org

Species Projections

Table 1. Climate suitability projections by 2050 under the high-emissions pathway for all birds currently present at the Monument based on both NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program data and eBird observation data, plus those species for which climate at the Monument 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
Mallard	Potential extirpation^	Stable
Cinnamon Teal	x	Potential colonization
Ruddy Duck	-	Potential colonization
Scaled Quail	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Gambel's Quail	Improving	Improving*
Northern Bobwhite	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Chukar	Stable	Stable
Wild Turkey	-	Potential colonization
Clark's Grebe	-	Potential colonization
American Bittern	-	Potential colonization^
Cattle Egret	Potential colonization	-
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	Potential colonization	-
White-faced Ibis	-	Potential colonization^
Mississippi Kite	Potential colonization	-
Red-tailed Hawk	Worsening	-
Killdeer	Stable	Improving
Mountain Plover	Potential colonization	-
Greater Yellowlegs	-	Potential colonization
Least Sandpiper	-	Potential colonization
Long-billed Dowitcher	-	Potential colonization
Mourning Dove	Stable	Stable
Inca Dove	-	Potential colonization
Greater Roadrunner	Potential colonization	Potential colonization

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Lesser Nighthawk	Potential colonization	-
Common Nighthawk	Stable	-
Black-chinned Hummingbird	Improving	-
Broad-tailed Hummingbird	Stable	-
Gila Woodpecker	-	Potential colonization
Golden-fronted Woodpecker	-	Potential colonization
Red-naped Sapsucker	-	Potential colonization
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Northern Flicker	Worsening	Improving
American Kestrel	x	Improving
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Potential extirpation	-
Western Wood-Pewee	Worsening*^	-
Gray Flycatcher	Stable	-
Black Phoebe	Stable	-
Say's Phoebe	Improving	Potential colonization
Ash-throated Flycatcher	Improving*	-
Western Kingbird	Stable	-
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	Potential colonization	-
Bell's Vireo	Potential colonization	-
Gray Jay	Potential extirpation	Potential extirpation
Pinyon Jay	Stable	Improving
California/Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (Western Scrub-Jay)	Stable	Improving
American Crow	Potential extirpation	Potential extirpation
Chihuahuan Raven	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Common Raven	Stable	Potential extirpation

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Tree Swallow	Potential extirpation	-
Violet-green Swallow	Stable	Potential colonization
Cliff Swallow	Stable	-
Mountain Chickadee	Stable	-
Juniper Titmouse	Stable	-
Verdin	-	Potential colonization
Bushtit	Improving	Improving
Rock Wren	Stable	Improving*
Canyon Wren	x	Improving
Bewick's Wren	Improving*	Improving*
Cactus Wren	Potential colonization	-
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Stable	Potential colonization
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Western Bluebird	-	Potential colonization
Mountain Bluebird	Stable	Improving*
American Robin	Potential extirpation	-
Curve-billed Thrasher	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
LeConte's Thrasher	Potential colonization	-
Sage Thrasher	-	Potential colonization
Northern Mockingbird	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
American Pipit	-	Potential colonization
Chestnut-collared Longspur	-	Potential colonization
Yellow Warbler	Potential extirpation	-
Yellow-rumped Warbler	Potential extirpation	Potential colonization
Grace's Warbler	Stable	-

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
Black-throated Gray Warbler	Stable	-
Yellow-breasted Chat	Stable	-
Spotted Towhee	Stable	x
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Canyon Towhee	-	Potential colonization
Cassin's Sparrow	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Chipping Sparrow	Stable	-
Brewer's Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Vesper Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Black-throated Sparrow	Improving	Potential colonization
Sagebrush/Bell's Sparrow (Sage Sparrow)	-	Potential colonization
Lark Bunting	-	Potential colonization
Savannah Sparrow	-	Potential colonization
Lincoln's Sparrow	-	Potential colonization

Common Name	Summer Trend	Winter Trend
White-crowned Sparrow	-	Improving
Dark-eyed Junco	x	Stable
Pyrrhuloxia	-	Potential colonization
Blue Grosbeak	Improving*	-
Painted Bunting	Potential colonization	-
Eastern Meadowlark	Potential colonization	Potential colonization
Brewer's Blackbird	Potential extirpation	Improving
Great-tailed Grackle	Potential colonization	-
Brown-headed Cowbird	Stable	-
Scott's Oriole	Potential colonization	-
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	-	Worsening*^
House Finch	Improving	-
Cassin's Finch	Stable	Worsening*
Red Crossbill	Potential extirpation^	x
Lesser Goldfinch	Improving	Potential colonization