



**BIRDS
CONNECT
SEATTLE**



Savannah Sparrow | Mick Thompson | Eastside Audubon

Fall 2026 EARTHCARE NORTHWEST

Sharing Parks with Ground Nesting Birds

by Carol Roll, Development Director

The Savannah Sparrow's nest is almost impossible to see. The small songbirds weave dried grass into a 3" cup that holds their precious clutch of eggs. The nest sits directly on the ground, hidden in the tall grass, making it particularly vulnerable to being crushed by off-trail footsteps.

Earlier this year, Birds Connect Seattle released our Fewer and Fewer report, documenting counts of local birds over the last two decades. Many species are declining for a variety of reasons, including habitat loss, climate change, and pesticides. For ground-nesting birds like the Savannah Sparrow and Killdeer, one source of stress that is easily preventable: people and dogs entering sensitive habitat during nesting season.



IN THIS ISSUE:

- Ground Nesting Birds
- Scoop the Poop
- Cats and Birds



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The fall issue of EarthCare Northwest was delivered to member homes on September 22, 2026. Become a member today to receive the next issue in print.

>>> Ground Nesting Birds (cont.)

Longtime community science volunteer Jan Bragg has monitored birds at Magnuson Park since the mid-1990s. "There were maybe ten Savannah Sparrow nesting pairs when I first started," she says. "Now we're down to one or two each year. It is really sad." Each spring, she places signs marking active nesting areas, hoping visitors will understand why staying on trails and keeping dogs leashed protects these vulnerable birds.

At Discovery Park, Friends of Discovery Park volunteers have watched Killdeer repeatedly flushed from their beach nests by off-leash dogs. Even when a dog never touches a bird, repeated disturbance forces parents to spend valuable energy avoiding danger instead of incubating eggs, foraging for food, or caring for their young.

The good news is that small actions can make a real difference. Choices like staying on designated trails, keeping dogs on short leashes to give nesting birds extra space, and walking pets in more developed areas rather than sensitive habitats can make a big difference for wildlife.

People visit Discovery and Magnuson Park to swim, picnic, play sports, watch birds, and exercise their dogs. Jan recognizes city living is about sharing these beloved green spaces. "I just want people to know and respect what else is living there and do their part to help protect it."



Savannah Sparrow at South Meadow, Discovery Park | Marcus Donner



Killdeer at North Beach, Discovery Park | Marcus Donner



Keep Pets on Trail for Nesting Birds

Seattle law requires dogs to be on a leash in public spaces and prohibits them from all public beaches, except designated off-leash dog areas. Do your part to keep nesting birds safe.

Scoop the Poop for Cleaner Water

by Carol Roll, Development Director

Hot summer days mean beach days—unless a toxic algae bloom closes a favorite swimming spot. Algal blooms can occur in local waterways like Green Lake and Lake Washington when excess nutrients combine with warm temperatures and sunlight, triggering rapid growth of cyanobacteria (blue-green algae).

Nutrient pollution can come from many human sources, including lawn fertilizers, decaying yard waste, stormwater runoff, and failing septic systems. One less-studied source is the nitrogen and phosphorus from pet urine and feces. A 2022 study found that dogs can contribute substantial amounts of these nutrients to urban natural areas, potentially affecting plant communities and slowing ecological restoration. The researchers recommended removing pet waste and accounting for these nutrient inputs when managing sensitive habitats. When pet waste is left on the ground, rain can wash nutrients into storm drains and waterways, adding to the nutrient load that fuels algae growth.

Algal blooms aren't just a concern for people. They can produce toxins, deplete dissolved oxygen, and harm aquatic vegetation, fish, and invertebrates that birds depend on. Wildlife can't simply choose to avoid these waterways during an algal bloom. Birds rely on wetlands and shorelines for drinking, bathing, feeding, and nesting.

Our Neighborhood Bird Project data shows declines in several waterbirds, such as Brant and Gadwall, species that rely heavily on aquatic habitats. Brant, for example, feed almost entirely on eelgrass, an aquatic plant that dies off when algal blooms block its sunlight or when algae grows directly on the plants.

There is still much to learn about how nutrient pollution affects our local bird populations—and pet waste is only one piece of a much larger problem. But it's an easy piece for each of us to address. So scoop it, bag it, and toss it in the garbage. Keeping pet waste out of our waterways is healthier for our ecosystems, people, and wildlife.



Cat with a songbird | Nils Jacobi, Canva

Cats and Birds: Finding a Way Forward

by Joshua Morris, Conservation Director

In 2020, my partner and I adopted Neo, a tuxedo cat named for the protagonist of the sci-fi blockbuster, *The Matrix*. In the film, Neo awakens to a world where machines are farming humans for their “bioelectricity”. In our life, Neo awakes to a world where he—15-times smaller than me—is allotted a full third of the bed; where one ironic amateur pet portrait proliferates into a dozen sincere tributes; where a nonsensical cat-directed pidgin is the default language spoken at home. Welcome to *The Meow-trix*. We are cat people.

We're not the only ones. According to the 2021 American Housing Survey, 22% of Seattle-area households have one or more cats, totaling roughly 500,000 pet cats across the region. We lack local data on outdoor access specifically, but if patterns here mirror those elsewhere, half or more of these cats would be allowed outside some of the time. Given that domestic cats' hunting prowess compares favorably to lions and that they hunt even when well-fed, the choices cat households make about outdoor access can have significant consequences for local wildlife.

As a conservation organization, we have a duty to address outdoor cats as a pressure on wild birds. As cat people, we have a desire to be careful. We are conscious of the long history of persecution of cats that the rhetoric of conservation has sometimes inflamed. As a first step toward more strategically and carefully engaging on this issue, our Conservation Committee adopted a position statement on outdoor, free-ranging cats. In it, we summarize our research of the scientific literature, our current understanding of local conditions, and provide initial recommendations.

Managing outdoor cats is complicated and emotionally charged. We're not expecting easy answers. But we're committed to engaging on the issue—with humility, with curiosity, and with our own cats harvesting the bioelectricity from our laps.

Research Insights

Cats kill an estimated 1.3 to 4.0 billion birds each year in the United States, making it the leading human-related cause of bird mortality.

Keeping cats indoors is safer for your pet and for birds and other wildlife.



Read our statement for details on the research, local context, and recommendations for outdoor cats

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Read more conservation stories on our blog:
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From the Executive Director

Dear Members,

Protecting birds and the places we all need to thrive is a collective responsibility. Oftentimes, that responsibility starts right in our own homes.

I think about this a lot when considering my family pets, Islay (a 2-year-old terrier) and BoyCat (an 18-year-old house cat). Being a responsible pet owner means thinking about their specific needs for food, comfort, and shelter. It also means being mindful about how they move through the world, in public spaces and if/when they venture outside my home.

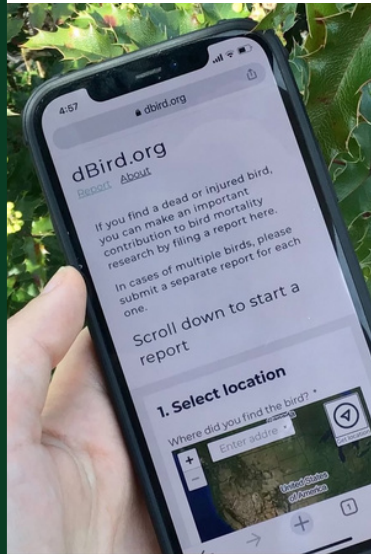
In this issue, you'll find the thoughtful work by our Conservation Committee on the latest research and recommendations on free-roaming cats, learn how people and off-leash dogs can disturb fragile urban meadows and beaches, and be reminded that scooping your pet's poop helps protect our waterways.

Small choices about our furry friends can quickly add up to make our communities safer for our feathered ones.



In gratitude,

Claire Catania
Executive Director



dBird.org: Data for Science

Migration season is here, bringing incredible journeys and increased risks for birds along the way. Hazards such as free-roaming cats and window collisions can turn these journeys deadly.

If you find an injured or dead bird, you can help scientists and conservation organizations better understand the threats birds face. Record your observation at dbird.org to contribute valuable data that can inform bird conservation and help reduce bird mortality.

New Merch & Nocs

Swing by our headquarters for new items like our one-of-a-kind block printed t-shirts, pins and patches to add a little birdy bling to any outfit, and our staff's favorite book picks!

Gear up for fall migration with our selection of trusted optics brands like Swarovski, Nikon, Zeiss, Kowa, and Nocs Provisions. New offerings come in fun colors like Banana Slug yellow, Corsican blue, and coral.

