

Commentary: Reflecting on reflections – and how wildlife interact with Portland's skyline

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Addy Smith-Reiman and Nick Lund

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When the four finalists for the expansion of the Portland Museum of Art were revealed last month, we had many of the same thoughts as others in the city: We were impressed at the beauty and scale of the designs, and excited to have a beautiful new addition to the city's skyline. But we also had another thought, one perhaps not shared by many others: "That sure is a lot of glass."

Maine Audubon, the Portland Society for Architecture and the University of Southern Maine are founding partners of BirdSafe Maine, a small volunteer group working to understand the issue of bird-glass collisions in Portland and around the state. Glass tricks birds by reflecting open sky or vegetation, or by creating an illusion of an open space, and birds become injured or are killed when they accidentally fly into the glass.

Glass collisions are one of the leading causes of bird mortality in the nation, killing an estimated 1 billion birds per year.

The problem is particularly acute in cities, where there is a lot of glass and migratory birds have fewer safe places to take shelter. Members of BirdSafe Maine have now been walking the streets of Portland during spring and fall migrations for more than two years looking for evidence of bird strikes, and we've found hundreds of birds of more than 30 species. Altogether, we estimate that between 40,000 and 50,000 birds are injured or killed each year after striking windows throughout the city of Portland.

We've also learned that certain buildings are more dangerous than others. In general, the more glass on a building, the more dangerous it is.



A rare redwing, also known as a European thrush, visits Capisic Pond Park in Portland on Jan. 30, 2021. Between 40,000 and 50,000 birds are injured or killed each year after striking windows throughout the city of Portland. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer, File*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Season to season, we find the most dead or injured birds alongside buildings along our route that have a high percentage of glass as well as contributing factors like nearby vegetation or “runways” of open space before the next building. Some of the proposed Portland Museum of Art designs combine large amounts of glass with visible vegetation, potentially making them significant new hazards in the city.

Other designs are less dangerous, and they also reveal the growing awareness among architects and designers about threats to migratory birds. Toshiko Mori specifically mentioned the use of bird-safe products during her public presentation in November, highlighting the growing number of architectural solutions designed specifically with birds in mind. Adjaye Associates' design employs the most effective bird-safe solution: simply limiting the amount of glass used on the façade.

Other forward-thinking Maine institutions are developing buildings with bird-safe standards.

The Davis Center for Human Ecology at the College of the Atlantic includes bird-safe glazing on its windows. Saddleback Mountain's new mid-mountain lodge will employ removable screens to protect sensitive breeding species in summers. L.L. Bean's new headquarters in Freeport features more than 19,000 square feet of bird-safe treatment. More buildings and private residences are being built with birds in mind as awareness grows among the architect and design community.

BirdSafe Maine is working to do its part, hosting conversations with architects and builders throughout Portland and beyond to make them aware of the dangers certain building features pose to migrating birds. That effort includes encouraging architects and their clients to move away from “large glass box” designs and other high-risk features, including glassed skywalks, glass railings and corner windows that create “fly-through” conditions.

We encourage the Portland Museum of Art, and other institutions in Maine designing new buildings, to think about how their work fits into the environmental landscape – not just of the immediate urban area, but of the entire state of Maine as well.

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