Why Birds Thrive on Organic Farms

By Brynne Degenhardt

Organic farms offer obvious benefits directly to humans and the environment but also to many other species indirectly, including birds. Likewise, birds offer benefits to organic farms. According to the research of Dr. Christy Morrissey, professor at the University of Saskatchewan, there are many reasons why birds and organic farming make a good team.

As it turns out, organic farms offer a very welcoming environment for birds. Dr. Morrisey's studies in Saskatchewan have found that organic farms have a higher abundance of birds in comparison to non-organic farms. Without harmful chemicals, plants and insects can thrive, allowing birds an abundance of shelter and nutritious food. This rich food web supports a wider variety of bird behaviours from foraging and nesting to chick rearing.

In a 2019 study, Dr. Morrissey's team found that sparrows exposed to pesticides lose up to 6% of their body weight and slow their migration patterns by over three days. On organic farms without pesticide usage, birds tend to be bulky and strong. Pesticides can lower bird's survival and reproduction rates so, more natural and chemical-free environments on organic farms are especially beneficial.

Healthy birds are also more resilient during long migrations, increasing their chances of returning to the same farm year after year. In turn, these birds can assist farmers with pest control. They can consume insects and other pests which may otherwise damage crops. Some species can reduce pest pressure dramatically during peak pest seasons, acting as a form of natural, self-sustaining crop protection. Birds feed on caterpillars, beetles, aphids, and other invertebrates that can decimate crops if left unchecked. By reducing reliance on chemical pesticides, birds not only help maintain healthy ecosystems but also support organic farmers in meeting strict certification standards. Over time, this can create a balanced system. A balanced and healthy ecosystem becomes more resilient to pest outbreaks, extreme weather, and other challenges.

Diversity in organic farms further provides suitable living arrangements for a wider range of bird species. For example, Barn and Tree Swallows fare better in more biodiverse areas. Organic farming practices such as crop rotation, hedgerowing, and cover-cropping create a wide range of habitats. These varied landscapes also offer safe nesting sites, reducing exposure to predators and harsh weather. Hedgerows and tree lines (common practices in organic farming) serve as corridors, allowing birds to move safely between feeding and nesting sites while also supporting other wildlife, like pollinators and small mammals. Organic management practices outlined by the Canadian Organic Standards such as clause 5.2.4 which reference the management of natural areas include measures to protect ecosystem health and often incorporate one or more features: pollinator habitats, insectary areas, wildlife habitats, maintaining or restoring riparian areas or wetlands; or other measures which promote biodiversity.

This encourages a diverse assortment of bird species to nest and feed in the area. Greater diversity of bird species can also help prevent monocultures of pests from taking hold, as different birds often feed on different insects. The presence of birds is an important indication of biodiversity in an ecosystem, which is a crucial factor in soil health. Bird droppings add nutrients to the soil and many birds can assist with pollination. Their movement across fields also helps disperse seeds, contributing to the regeneration of native plants and groundcover. Just one more reason organic farmers value having birds around.

Birds' interactions with organic farms are not just functional—they are also ecological signals. Farmers and researchers can use bird presence and population trends as indicators of overall ecosystem health, providing valuable insights into soil quality, water availability, and plant diversity. By observing birds, farmers can detect imbalances in their fields early and implement organic management practices to correct them. This ongoing, living feedback loop is a unique advantage that only a biodiverse farm ecosystem can provide.

Their relationship forms a mutually supportive cycle: healthy farms create healthy birds, and healthy birds help maintain healthy farms. Organic farms provide safe havens, abundant food, and diverse habitats, while birds contribute to pest control, pollination, seed dispersal, and soil enrichment. This partnership demonstrates how agricultural practices that prioritize ecological balance can yield tangible benefits for both humans and wildlife. Ultimately, promoting bird-friendly practices on organic farms not only strengthens farm productivity and sustainability but also contributes to the conservation of bird populations, many of which are facing pressures from habitat loss and environmental degradation. So as you can see, birds and organic farming work well together, naturally.

References:

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