

“Feathered Hope in Action”
Katie Yelinek
UUCSV Sermon 4/19/2026

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Katie Yelinek. I'm a librarian at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania—Bloomsburg. When I'm not poking my nose in a book, I'm often found talking to birds. I've been a bird watcher since I was seven, and I'm a proud bird parent. I share my home with one of the most adorable and most spoiled parakeets in the Western Hemisphere.

This is my favorite time of year because birds! As we gather here, millions even billions of birds are migrating north. They're flying from their wintering grounds in South and Central America, streaming up to their breeding grounds in North America. There are so many that they can be tracked by satellite. This is the time of year that a bird watcher in Pennsylvania like me lives for.

When I first proposed this service, I didn't know that Claire Lawrence and Sabrina Kirby were also planning a bird service for February. When I learned that, I decided to tweak my proposal to make this a part two or sequel service. They spoke of birds and hope. Now we're going to be putting that hope into action. It's fitting that right now we are also celebrating both Earth Day and International Dark Sky Week.

And so I want to talk with you this morning about birds. Emily Dickinson said hope is the thing with feathers. But she also said hope didn't ask a crumb of her, but for us, that is wrong. Birds are in trouble, and there are things we can do to help them. So today I want to talk about hope in action. Both the actions that birds take—their importance in the natural world, their cultural and spiritual meanings. What they can teach us. And finally what we can do to help them.

To begin talking about birds, let's not forget that birds are dinosaurs. When the asteroid struck, it killed the dinosaurs, all of them except the avian dinosaurs. We now have evidence that many dinosaurs had feathers. Likely the velociraptors made famous in *Jurassic Park* had feathers. Fossilized dinosaurs have been found sleeping with their heads turned on their backs like birds do today. So birds in one form or another have been on this planet for hundreds of

millions of years. They now fill all sorts of ecological niches. Let's look at a few of them and see what birds do for us.

Birds pollinate. Hummingbirds are well known for flitting from flower to flower and pollinating. They are now arriving in our part of Pennsylvania, so if you haven't put out your hummingbird feeders yet, do that! So hummingbirds pollinate but other birds do too. Here in Pennsylvania, this includes Baltimore and Northern orioles. In other parts of the world, sunbirds, honeycreepers, and certain doves also pollinate. If we want flowers and flowering plants, we need birds.

Birds spread seeds. Every parakeet I've ever been a caretaker for has been a little seed fiend, and I can personally testify to how skilled they are at flinging seeds all over my den. Birds in nature do this, too. Birds cache seeds for winter and then forget or don't eat them, letting new plants grow. Finches and chickadees fling seeds when they're eating, letting them fly—no pun intended—and germinate. Of course, birds also carry seeds in their guts, which can let seeds travel longer distances. Because of birds, forests spread and burned areas regenerate.

Birds spread nutrients. Here, again, I'm speaking delicately of the activities of bird guts and the byproducts of those guts. This applies especially to sea birds that are quite talented at pulling nutrients out of the sea and then redistributing them inland. This is why farmers for centuries have used bird guano as fertilizer.

Birds catch insects. In fact, this is why birds come north in spring, because this is the time of year when insects become abundant in the northern hemisphere. If you don't want an area to be overrun by bugs, make sure to make it bird friendly. This truism was made plain by an infamous event from Communist China, which took place in the late 1950s. In an attempt to keep sparrows from eating grain crops, the government encouraged citizens to kill house sparrows. People did this so effectively that sparrows became locally extinct. But while house sparrows eat grain seeds as adults, they feed their

young insects. With the sparrows locally eradicated, insect populations exploded and decimated crops far more than the sparrows ever had, which was a contributing factor to famine in China from 1959 to 1961. It led to tens of millions of people starving to death.

Birds catch mice and rats. Owls can be creepy or wise, depending on your point of view, but they are also awesome mice catchers. A barn owl can eat three to four mice each and every night. Having owls and other birds of prey on farms have been correlated to decreased pests and increased crop yields.

And finally, birds clean up waste. As Claire so eloquently reminded us, vultures get a bad rap but they are an integral part of nature's sanitary team. In the 1980s in India, vultures started dying out due to a painkiller fed to cattle. The vultures who fed on the dead cattle dosed with the painkillers died. Vulture populations in some parts of India declined by over 90% by the early 2000s. Without the vultures to clean up the dead cattle, bacteria and other pathogens spread. One study estimated this contributed to the death of 500,000 people over 5 years. Once again, a lack of birds was literally deadly to humans.

But birds are important for more than just their ecological roles. Many of you will have heard of nature deficit syndrome, the idea that people who don't have regular contact with the natural world live with increased anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues. Recent studies have shown that listening to bird song lowers anxiety and reduces paranoia. Another study showed hearing birds sing can alleviate symptoms of depression. In fact, hearing or seeing birds is even more beneficial than spending time outdoors in green spaces devoid of birds. While I'm not part of any peer-reviewed studies, I can personally testify that having to care for my birds has sometimes been the only reason I've gotten out of bed.

Birds can also bring us together. Anybody out there resonate with the phrase "Go Birds!"? Birds have been mascots of many sports teams from the specific Baltimore Orioles to the more generic Seattle Sea Hawks. My own undergraduate college, Bryn Mawr College, used an owl as a mascot,

symbolizing the wisdom associated with the Greek goddess Athena. America's symbol, the bald eagle is supposed to represent independence, freedom, and strength. This even though in nature bald eagles are generally fish scavengers who have a thin, shrill whinnying cry—not the fierce scream often attributed to them. So often the meaning we give to birds says more about us and our needs than the birds themselves.

Birds have helped advance our understanding of non-human animal intelligence. Alex the grey parrot with his animal psychologist Irene Pepperberg is perhaps the poster bird for bird intelligence studies. Alex demonstrated the ability to learn a wide vocabulary and the understanding of such concepts as shapes, colors, addition, and zero. His intelligence was on par with that of dolphins and great apes. Parrots and corvids—or members of the crow family, including ravens and jays—are generally considered the most intelligent bird species. (I think parrots are smarter, but I might be biased.) Members of these species have been shown to use and make tools, recognize individual human faces, and mourn their dead. There's also growing evidence that non-human animals, including birds, dream. How birds do this when many of them sleep with only half their brains at a time, like dolphins, I can't even imagine. It's another way that birds show the complexity and ingenuity of life on this planet.

Finally, birds also represent the spiritual. In many human cultures stretching back millennia, birds represent a bridge to the divine. After all, if you look up to the life-giving sun, what do you see? Birds flying overhead. Birds can span the distance from mere mortals on the ground to the cloud-spangled realm of the heavens. They go where we can't go. Not only can they fly to the sky dome but many sea birds dive into the depths of the ocean and return. So here they are, these bipedal creatures that sit upright like we do and who have faces that superficially resemble ours but who can fly and penetrate the depths of the ocean. No wonder humans across time and space have seen them as intermediaries with the gods. Not only that, but each spring in northern climes, just as winter is releasing its icy grip, the birds return. Ancient peoples might not

have known where the birds went in winter but they knew for sure they returned just as the world was reawakening. Birds then laid eggs that looked as lifeless as stone but from which hatched live chicks. No wonder then that birds have come to represent rebirth, resurrection, and fertility. It's why to this day we celebrate Easter with eggs.

I could go on about birds. I haven't mentioned how some birds can see the earth's magnetic field, which blows my mind. Or how one of my birds stood guard by her buddy when he was in end-stage heart failure, showing more empathy than some humans do. But I would be remiss if I didn't end this message with a call for action from us humans. As Sabrina mentioned back in February, a widely cited 2019 study published in the journal *Science* showed that North America today has lost 3 billion—with a b—birds since 1970. This is 25%—one in four—of our birds have disappeared in the last fifty years—or, a little over my lifetime. Birds are in trouble. I, for one, don't want to live in a world without birds, which is where many population trends are going. So I am asking for you to help save birds. I'm asking you to give them more than a crumb.

I admit: It is unfair to put the responsibility on individuals to save birds when corporations and governments seem to be able to destroy our natural world without consequences, but here we are. Until the time comes when big business and governments become environmental stewards, I'm going to point out 5 steps you can take to help protect our feathered friends. There are many other ways, and you can Google them. But I thought 5 is a good place to start. Some of these might be familiar to you.

First, plant native plants. Every single native plant helps. You don't have to make your entire yard nothing but native, but the more natives the better. Not only do they provide direct food for birds but they host the insects that birds eat. Ask your favorite nursery to carry native plants. If you need help identifying what is native, there are many online guides to help with that.

Second, drink shade-grown coffee. This is coffee grown in an environmentally sustainable way. Coffee grown this way protects birds on their

wintering grounds which is as important as protecting them during migration and on their breeding grounds. Look for coffee that's labelled Bird Friendly by the Smithsonian. I personally don't drink coffee so I can't point you to a local place that carries this, but I know it's easily found online.

Third, keep your cats indoors and work to reduce feral cat populations. Yes, I know this is controversial. But studies estimate that free-roaming cats kill 1.3 to 4 billion—again, billion with a b—birds per year. Cats after all are not native, and there are a lot of them. Even well-fed pampered cats will kill birds just because it's what evolution designed them to do.

Fourth, make your windows visible to birds. I'm sure many of you have heard the sound of a bird striking a window in your home or office. The reality is that birds have not evolved to see glass. They just don't understand it. Some bird eyes are even situated on the sides of their heads so they can't see directly in front of them when they are flying. When birds do see glass, they focus on the reflection of vegetation or clouds and assume the way is clear. Estimates say collisions with glass kill between 365 million and one billion birds every year in the U.S. To keep birds from hitting your windows, there are lots of things you can do. You can install screens, mark your windows with specially designed bird tape or markers, or move your indoor plants away from the windows. Additional things you can do are easily found through an internet search.

Fifth and finally, reduce light pollution. For anybody who hasn't heard this term, light pollution refers to the idea that for millions of years, night on this planet was dark. But recently artificial light means it's no longer dark at night. This nighttime light has been shown to cause serious health and environmental issues for both human and non-human animals, including birds. Birds exposed to artificial light at night harbor viruses longer and mistime their breeding songs. They also go off track on their migrations, sometimes flying into buildings. In one infamous incident in October 2020, stormy weather caused 1000 birds to die in just one night when they flew into lit-up windows in Philadelphia. So it's important to reduce excess lights at night, especially during peak migration

times of April 15-May 30 and August 15 to November 15. So, try shutting your blinds after dark, putting outdoor lights on timers or motion detectors, and shielding outside lights to ensure they only point where they need to. We're just wrapping up International Dark Sky Week, which runs April 13 to 20 this year, and is a week designed to celebrate the importance of darkness to human and animal health and to teach the importance of responsible nighttime lighting. You can easily find more information about reducing light pollution online. The organization DarkSky International is a really good resource for this.

When you do, the birds, and the people who love them, will thank you.