

Stiftung
Kunst
und Natur

Bird's-Eye Views

The Birds
and Us

22.3.—

9.8.2026

Museum
Sinclair-Haus

Bird's-Eye Views

In a café recently I heard someone happily recounting a reunion with a robin that always used to come to their balcony but that had been absent for a long time. The poet Norbert Hummelt has been waiting for the common swifts every year since he first noticed them at the age of forty. As a child with my grandparents, I used to feed the titmice sunflower seeds from my hand, calling the birds “Hansi” (there were always different ones, but they were all called that). Seeing and hearing birds makes many people happy.¹ Millions of people worldwide spend their free time observing them, and the songs and aerial acrobatics of birds have inspired the arts for centuries.

Our exhibition entitled “Bird's-Eye Views – The Birds and Us” invites visitors to encounter birds at eye level, both literally and figuratively. We see them not as objects to be observed but rather as co-creators of shared habitats and as fellow creatures. The sculptures, films, photographs, and paintings by the participating artists record flight paths, songs, and swarm movements, acquainting us humans with birds in a different way. They reveal the beauty of the avian world and simultaneously inquire about responsible paths to a shared future and possibilities for changing our perspective – or expanding our imagination. You will encounter flocks of starlings, a giant yellowhammer, pigeons, nightingales, dreaming zebra finches, and many others. Sadly, we probably have more bird species on display in the exhibition than some ecosystems do – bird populations have been declining worldwide for decades (see p. 38). In that context the exhibition asks what birds mean to us. How do we engage with the birds around us? What questions about them do we pose ourselves? What do we make of our coexistence with them, our role, and our responsibility? How can we imagine the bird's perspective on the world?

And what do we actually mean by “bird's-eye views”? At any rate, we do not show you what the world looks like from above but instead reveal facets of the human view of birds. We invite you to broaden your own perspective and wish you an enjoyable visit to this exhibition.

Kathrin Meyer (Director) and the entire team at Museum Sinclair-Haus

¹ Study on the importance of bird diversity for the quality of life, from the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research: J. Methorst et al. (2020), “The importance of species diversity for human well-being in Europe.” *Ecological Economics*, doi: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106917; Study on the importance of birdsong for mental health, from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf: E. Stobbe, J. Sundermann, L. Ascone et al. (2022), “Birdsongs alleviate anxiety and paranoia in healthy participants.” *Scientific Reports* 12, 16414, doi: 10.1038/s41598-022-20841-0.

On Earth

We humans always live together with other animals. Some enter our homes uninvited, others we see from a distance outside, and a few we make our companions. Our relationships with these “pets” are special because they usually entail deep emotional responses – at least in our human perspective. However, animals have not sought this cohabitation, and we have the responsibility to care for them as best we can. Living together is about different needs that human and nonhuman companions have. They come to know each other and develop shared habits. We explore the stories of these pets from the accounts of the people they live with as well as from objects that preserve memories of the time they share.

The exhibition begins with a brief look at the close coexistence of birds and humans in apartments, houses, or their immediate vicinity. The objects and images also convey how different our understanding of birds can be: as artists, co-creators, individuals, residents, and neighbors.



WEEKLY CMUK

2014–ongoing, series of décollages/photographs, 40 × 60 cm each;

image: No. 28, 2016 | without image: No. 13, 2016; No. 29, 2016

Courtesy of Hörner/Antlfinger/CMUK

© CMUK

Ute Hörner and Mathias Antlfinger share a household with their parrots. The human and nonhuman partners in this interspecies arrangement create art on an equal footing. For the series *weekly* the birds have been working with the magazine of the newspaper *Die Zeit* since 2014. Using their beaks and claws, the parrots bite, tear, and scratch the pages of the publication. The resulting holes, snippets, and superimpositions open up new connections between text and image. The materials are offered to the birds, which decide for themselves whether and how to use them. Arising from within, their actions are free of functionality and constraints of productivity. When the time is right for them, Hörner and Antlfinger declare the work completed. They value the artistic competence of their nonhuman partners and highlight it by selecting and arranging what the parrots have done and by recording the result photographically. The participants have found their individual roles in this collaborative process. No one is more important than the other, and all make an indispensable contribution to the work.

CMUK is an interspecies collective created in 2014 by the African gray parrots Clara and Karl and by Ute Hörner and Mathias Antlfinger. The name CMUK derives from the first initials of these founding members.

Today, the parrots Clara, Giselle, and Casper live in the household.



UNTITLED (NEST)

Björn Braun (* 1979)

2010, twigs, cord, nylon strand, 17 × 17 × 11 cm | without image: *Untitled (nest)*, 2018, Coconut fibers, artificial feathers, artificial plants, dyed wood chips, 13.5 × 15 × 9 cm; *Untitled (nest)*, 2018, coconut fibers, tinsel, cardboard, artificial feathers, artificial moss, artificial flowers, 14.5 × 16 × 6 cm

Courtesy and © Björn Braun

The bird's nest is considered the epitome of a sheltering space: a place to care for and protect offspring. Some birds use existing cavities; others work with items they find, such as twigs, stalks, or feathers. Zebra finches, for instance, use whatever they can collect. But not every material is suitable. Nest-building is a process of selecting, discarding, and repeated attempts.

The result of such decisions is apparent in the nests built by two male zebra finches that lived with Björn Braun. The artist provided natural and synthetic materials in different colors and textures, such as plastic threads or yarn, for nest-building. The birds themselves decided which materials to use.

Cohabitation

Probably ever since humans first appeared on earth, they have shown interest in their feathered fellow creatures. If you want to learn about birds, you have to go to them, observe them closely, and have a lot of patience. Or be fortunate enough to have many of them around you. Early scientific behavioral research was noted for a number of unusual experiments, which we will briefly highlight here.

Magdalena and Oskar Heinroth (1883–1932 and 1871–1945)

set up an apartment-sharing community with birds: Between 1904 and 1932 approximately a thousand birds lived with them in their rented accommodation in Berlin. The project centered on precise scientific documentation, with the couple keeping diaries in which they recorded the birds' growth, behavior, and development of plumage. The results culminated in their four-volume work entitled *Die Vögel Mitteleuropas* (The Birds of Central Europe, 1924–1933), which marked the beginning of behavioral research in Germany.

In the exhibition: *Dippers with an artificial stream in their cage*, around 1910;

Magdalena Heinroth with three jackdaws that she raised herself, around 1919;

Magdalena Heinroth with two black grouse on her porch, around 1928; photographs

Len Howard (1894–1973)

lived in her “bird cottage” from 1938 until her death. The British violist's house in southern England was open all year round – she only refrained from having human guests, because they would have disturbed the birds. She came to know her avian visitors as individuals and wrote bestsellers about her observations. She was not recognized by experts, however, because the methods she used could not be transferred to other situations.

In the exhibition: *Len Howard drawing a great tit*, 1950; *Len Howard in her Bird Cottage*, 1952;

Len Howard feeding a great tit at the window, 1957; photographs

Margaret Morse Nice (1883–1974)

spent many years observing and documenting the behavior of song sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*). The American ornithologist was one of the first to use colored rings to systematically study birds – specifically those around her home, in which at that time she was primarily responsible for caring for her three children and the household. Her work *The Behavior of the Song Sparrow* (1937) is considered a milestone in research on bird behavior.

In the exhibition: *Margaret Morse Nice in the grass with the nest of baby sparrows*, 1956; photograph

In the Sky

What would it be like to be able to fly? Freedom, effortless, the apparent simplicity of flying from here to there – bird flight has always fascinated us humans.

Since the time of *Archaeopteryx*, the “primitive bird” that lived around 150 million years ago, most of its descendants have perfected the art of flying. They move in elaborate choreographies through a habitat inaccessible to us – the sky.

Every year, several billion migratory birds set off from Europe and head for Africa, with no one showing them the way. According to research, two factors play a decisive role in helping them reach their destination: genetics and their capacity to perceive the Earth’s magnetic field. The genetic makeup of these animals bestows them with a rough travel route. In addition, a light-sensitive molecule (cryptochrome) can serve as an internal magnetic compass. When exposed to blue or green light, it triggers quantum physical reactions influenced by the Earth’s magnetic field.

Unlike the instinctive flight paths of these seemingly weightless animals in the sky, human movement seems rather unremarkable from a bird’s perspective. This section of the exhibition follows the birds into the air and captures a bit of their journeys in images based partly on the watcher’s own observations, partly on data and their visual translations.



ORNITHOGRAPHIES

Xavi Bou (* 1979)

2014–ongoing, series of photographs; Image: *Ornithography #227*, 2022, 78 × 149 cm, starling and peregrine falcon, Roses (Catalonia) | without image: *Ornithography #184*, 2020, 78 × 149 cm, common swift, Palafrugell (Catalonia); *Ornithography #233*, 2022, 119 × 62 cm, common crane, Gallocanta (Spain); *Ornithography #249*, 2022, 78 × 149 cm, Eurasian oystercatcher, North Uist (Island of the Outer Hebrides, Scotland)

Loan of the artist and Mathematikum Gießen | © Xavi Bou

What if we could visualize the paths that birds trace in the air – movements too fast, too intricate for the human eye to follow? In *Ornithographies*, Xavi Bou captures these invisible trajectories, making visible the memory of flight. What we normally perceive as a blur becomes a precise and fluid calligraphy in the sky.

His fascination with bird movement began in childhood while birdwatching with his grandfather near the Llobregat River in Catalonia. Years later, this early connection evolved into a project that fuses science and art. Bou uses high-speed video to record up to 60 frames per second, later layering between 300 and 5,000 images into a single visual trace.

The result is a synthesis of time and space – a choreography where each species writes its own rhythm across the sky. *Ornithographies* is not a study of form, but a poetic cartography of motion, one that invites us to pause and contemplate what usually escapes our senses.



LA SOSTA

Christoph Brech (* 1964)

2010, video, 7:29 min.

Courtesy of the Neues Museum Nuremberg

© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026

La Sosta tells of rest and movement, of transience and return. Thousands of starlings gather in the evening sky above Rome. They form clouds and swirls, sometimes close together, sometimes far apart. Christoph Brech's video entitled *La Sosta* (The Rest) invites viewers to silently watch the dynamic flight paths of the starlings as captured in the fixed frame of the artist's video camera.

The synchronized shape-shifting patterns formed by these birds as they swarm, a phenomenon known as murmuration, are unique. Each bird orientates itself in flight to only six or seven neighbors. The behavior creates a collective organism. The community protects itself against predators, provides warmth, and, as a body, locates a safe place to rest at night.

Up to 4 million starlings spend the winter in Rome from October to February. Brech links the annual coming and going of the migratory birds to the slowly fading reverberation of a Buddhist temple gong from Taipei, which represents the passing of time. With image and sound decoupled, *La Sosta* is far removed from the actually perceived situation – the background noise of Rome, where many people consider the starlings a nuisance.



SWALLOWS

Olaus Magnus (1490–1557)

“Wie offermals Schwalben under den Vischen aus dem Wasser gezogen werden”
[How often swallows are pulled from the water under the fish], image from:
Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, Rome, 1555 (reproduction)

Swallows announce the return of spring. But where do they head before winter? Thanks to many years of research with bird ringing, or banding as it is known in the United States, and sensors, we now know the answer quite precisely: On the way to Africa, swallows cover over 10,000 kilometers (more than 62,000 miles), up to a thousand kilometers (about 620 miles) a day.

Past lack of scientific foundations quickly gave rise to assumptions that seem far-fetched to us today. In his book entitled *Geschichte der nordischen Länder* (History of the Nordic Countries), the sixteenth-century Swedish scholar Olaus Magnus wrote that swallows in those regions spend the winter underwater: “But in the midnight lands, they are often pulled out of the water by fishermen in large quantities.”¹ The illustration in his work shows fishermen wearing cleated shoes on the ice as they use nets to pull the swallows ashore. The origin of this attempted explanation remains unclear. People today know for certain to look into the sky, not into fishing nets, for the phenomenon that announces spring: the return of the swallows. Bird-ringing began in 1899, and a few years later it was proven that some species spend the winter in the south.

¹Olaus Magnus and Johann Baptist Fickler: *Olaj Magni Historien der mitnächtigen Länder*, Basel, 1567, p. 537.



ATLAS OF BIRD MIGRATION

Online bird migration atlas of the *European Union for Bird Ringing (EURING)*

Some bird species migrate across continents. They are guided by their instinct and an internal compass oriented, among other things, to the Earth's magnetic field. These journeys, all but impossible to watch in their entirety, are depicted in the *Eurasian-African Bird Migration Atlas* by means of maps, lines, and cycles in which the movements of the birds come together into a picture of global patterns. The animals are exposed to many dangers on their long way, with many individuals dying every year from collisions with aircraft and glass façades, from increasing light pollution, and from hunting. The atlas is based on more than a century of ringing data and modern tracking technologies. It traces the migration routes of around 300 species between Eurasia and Africa. The atlas thus provides a scientific basis for the *Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)*¹ which coordinates the protection of migratory birds across national borders. What may seem abstract at first glance is evidence of astonishing precision, endurance, and interconnectedness: habitats, seasons, and continents are inextricably linked by bird migration – and make it clear that the protection of animals can only succeed through joint efforts.

¹ This framework agreement, also known as the *Bonn Convention*, is an international environmental treaty under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which commits the signatory states to the joint conservation and sustainable use of migratory animals and their habitats across national borders. Since 1983 it has served as a worldwide platform for cooperative conservation measures by listing endangered species, stipulating obligations to safeguard them, and reaching international agreements to improve their conservation status.



Image from the *Bird Migration Atlas*, showing the flight routes of common starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*)



The Eurasian-African Bird Migration Atlas

Engaging with Birds

How do we engage with birds? We often hear them before seeing them, and once you start listening closely, it is hard to ignore them. Bird calls shape our acoustic experience of the world – particularly in spring, when many species return from their wintering grounds. Using their songs to mark their presence, birds demarcate their territories and communicate, especially during the mating season. When birds encounter each other, we watch and listen – and probably feel as though we are hearing a foreign language. What is it all about? Who is talking?

The world has approximately 10,000 bird species, with about 300 of them breeding regularly in Germany. Each of them communicates in its own way, has its own plumage, and behaves in a characteristic manner. Some people spend their entire lives exploring the world of birds. In three rooms located on the first and second floors, this section of the exhibition gathers works that tell of encounters with birds: of translations, interpretations, the joys of observation, and shared suffering.



BIRDWATCHER

Ulrike Franke (* 1970) and Michael Loeken (* 1954)

2025, video, 10:50 min.

Courtesy and © filmproduktion loekenfranke

“What kind of small brown bird is that?” Although this question is certainly on some people’s minds, the reasons for birdwatching are more diverse. They include curiosity, relaxation, or the desire to be close to nature. To make the documentary film entitled *WATCHING PEOPLE WATCHING BIRDS* (due for release in 2026), Ulrike Franke and Michael Loeken spent several years talking to people who are repeatedly drawn to birds, whether to forests, oceans, parks, or orchards. The montage they have compiled from this material tells, among other things, of the joy of becoming still, of listening and watching – and of the fear of losing this joy.

With Michael Bruchmann, Jonathan Franzen, Thomas Griesohn-Pflieger, Bettina Hablützel, Patrick Kretz, Janna Ouedraogo, and Andrea Wilke

TÖNENDE TIERE (SONOROUS ANIMALS)

Dominik Eulberg (* 1978) and Matthias Garff (* 1986)

2023, series of sculptures; exhibited: *Yellowhammer*, 2019, wood, bamboo, metal, textiles, papier-mâché, paint, reflectors, 225 × 205 × 240 cm;

Great spotted woodpecker, 2020, shoes, trowel, pot holder, brush, paint, 44 × 14 × 46 cm;

Blackbird, 2022, rubber boots, leather gloves, colored pencils, sheet metal, 30 × 15 × 50 cm;

Icterine warbler, 2022, watering can, leather saddle, brush, zipper, scissors, 30 × 12 × 22 cm;

Nightingale, 2022, violin, scissors, leather glove, shoe lasts, 30 × 10 × 55 cm;

Goldfinch, 2022, plunger, shoe tree, textile, foldable measuring stick, 45 × 35 × 15 cm;

Common golden oriole, 2022, leather shoes, scissors, bicycle saddle, glasses case, 30 × 12 × 45 cm;

Black woodpecker, 2022, boots, shoe leather, hedge trimmers, gloves, 35 × 12 × 55 cm;

Common chiffchaff, 2022, cobbler's lasts, bicycle lamp, shoe leather, scissors, 30 × 12 × 35 cm;

Willow warbler, 2022, cobbler's lasts, bicycle lamp, shoe leather, scissors, 30 × 12 × 40 cm;

House sparrow I, 2023, garden shears, aluminum, gloves, cherry pits, shoe lasts, curtain rings, 26 × 10 × 30 cm

Courtesy and © Matthias Garff

Garden shears, pot holders, brushes, leather gloves – what reads like a shopping list is actually the raw materials for Matthias Garff's bird sculptures. He makes humorous images from everyday objects, but they are always true-to-life. He is often inspired by birds he comes across by chance.

His enthusiasm about animals began early on – while drawing with his grandfather. He is particularly interested in their individual characters and the question of whether they can be clearly recognized despite the materials he substitutes to make them.

Collaborating with ecologist and musician Dominik Eulberg, Garff created a colorful flock of birds: the *Tönende Tiere (Sounding Animals)*. The ones modeled by Garff are always accompanied by a music composition derived from their songs, which Eulberg has transcribed into musical notation and translated synthesizer data. The result is an exciting mélange of natural animal sounds and electronic tones.

Podcast Art'n'Vielfalt 

Why do we observe birds?



With Matthias Garff and
Silke Hartmann,
"Die Vogelguckerin"



BIRDS OF CENTRAL PARK

Matthias Garff (* 1986)

2025, video, 16 parts, total length 8:17 min.

Courtesy and © Matthias Garff

Who are the birds of Central Park? Matthias Garff introduces them to us in an unusual natural history tour that draws on observations he made of bird life in Central Park during his time as an artist-in-residence in New York City. He developed sixteen bird sculptures from everyday objects that he collected on his walks through the city. The use of these materials attests to the intertwining of human presence and animal life in urban spaces.

As jointed objects, the sculptures can be manipulated and maneuvered like marionettes. The documentary shows Garff in the role of the narrator, taking his colorful flock of birds through their natural habitat. He highlights their individual characters, behaviors, modes of life, and remarkable abilities and describes their relationships. The presentation's sober tone contrasts with the materials from which Garff fashioned his avian models. That variance enables an interplay of sculptural and documentary ways of communicating about nature.

VIDEO CONFERENCE FOR THE BIRDS

Marcus Coates (* 1968)

2023, Video, 34:50 min.

Loan of the artist, Courtesy Marcus Coates and Kate MacGarry, London

© Marcus Coates, 2023

What are the challenges of being a bird? What would preoccupy me as a blackbird? How would I react to a cuckoo killing my offspring? These questions are challenging for humans: when we search for answers, we quickly realize that it is impossible to adopt a non-human perspective – but we can make the most of our human capacity for imagination. But trying for Marcus Coates is an important step, not only in using the imagination to transform the distance between us and other beings, but also the distance between humans.

Marcus Coates conducts a thought experiment with his ‘video conference for birds’. He invites seven bird experts to embody a species of their choice in a video conference format. As we join the meeting of birds, the discussion is being introduced by the Dotterel: „What are the challenges in your life, what are the problems you face?“ The improvised dialogue that follows is lively, honest and personal. In the end, we listeners learn a lot about the real problems birds face – but also we hear some truths about humans. The experts’ values and opinions are challenged. They reported that speaking as a bird enabled them to be more honest and see themselves differently. It suggests that making an attempt at empathy across species is linked with self awareness. We can never think and feel as a bird. But trying to do so can create a new quality of relationship – and, from these bird’s-eye perspectives, perhaps lead us to both shape our coexistence with other species differently and know ourselves better.

In the role of the Blackbird: Geoff Sample; Cuckoo: Helen Macdonald; Dotterel: Marcus Coates; Great Black-backed Gull: Sally Reay; Heron: Ceri Levy; Roseate Tern: Tom Cadwallender; Tree Sparrow: Muriel Cadwallender
Special thanks to: Grant Joffe, Maggi Davies, Jo Phelps, Croome National Trust for their cooperation and production assistance.

This film was produced as part of the On-site/Off-site project, led by Newcastle University in partnership with the Bewick Society and National Trust. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.



Helen Macdonald in the role of the cuckoo

„One way to stop seeing trees, or rivers, or hills, only as ‘natural resources,’ is to class them as fellow beings – kinfolk. I guess I’m trying to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us. To subjectify is not necessarily to co-opt, colonize, exploit. Rather it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination. What tools have we got to help us make that reach?“

From: Ursula K. Le Guin: „Deep in Admiration“,
In: idem: *Late in the Day: Poems 2010–2014*,
Oakland / Edinburgh: PM Press. 2015, S. vii.

FIVE TIPS FOR SEEING MORE BIRDS

(Detailed version with 10 tips:

vogelguckerin.de/10-gute-tipps-um-mehr-voegel-zu-sehen/)

You want to observe lots of different birds, but only ever see blackbirds and sparrows? You are interested in birds, but you don't really know how to approach them? Here are five tips from blogger, author, and bird expert Silke Hartmann.



1. Look through bird books

It's true that we only see what we know. But when we first start birdwatching, we constantly see birds we don't know. Leafing through bird books from time to time helps identify birds in nature.

2. Take a break

On your next walk in nature, take a break and stand or sit quietly for five minutes. Some birds fall silent or hide when they notice you. But soon they will start talking again and come out. If you stand still for a few minutes, the birds will no longer see you as a threat and may even forget that you are there.

3. Take identification photos

If you see a bird that you cannot identify right away, take a photo of it if possible. It's perfectly fine if the photo is blurry: the main thing is that the bird is reasonably recognizable. Even a fairly poor image will usually make it easier for you to identify the bird at home.

4. Become an early riser

You can spot birds all day long, but they are most active in the morning and therefore easiest to see at that time. You don't have to set off on a birdwatching expedition immediately. Just take a few minutes on your way to school, the university, or work to look for birds.

5. Keep an observation journal

When you're out birdwatching, record everything you find interesting: what species you spot and where, what the birds are doing, what the weather is like, how many blue birds you encounter, how high your birding happiness factor is, and so on. Take notes or make a small drawing.



OBSERVING EYE

Sanna Kannisto (* 1979)

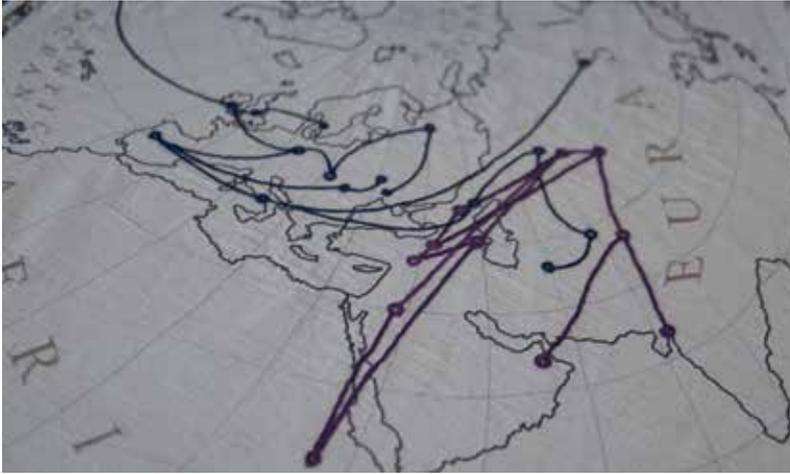
Observing Eye: *Aegithalos caudatus* (long-tailed tit), 2019, 4K video, 6:22 min.

Without image: *Cyanocompsa cyanoides* (blue-black grosbeak), 2019, photograph,

160 × 120 cm | Videos: Observing Eye: 4K videos, 2019: *Acanthis flammea* (redpoll), 4:29 min. | *Cyanistes caeruleus* (Eurasian blue tit), 3:57 min. | *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (Eurasian bullfinch), 3:22 min. | *Erithacus rubecula* (European robin), 4:23 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Persons Projects | © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026

A quick glance, a faint rustling – and the bird is gone again. Our encounters with blue tits, wrens, blackcaps, and other birds are fleeting. Artist Sanna Kannisto momentarily bridges this distance. Her mobile studio is located at a scientific bird ringing station in a Finnish forest, which can be seen here on the wall in the background. She briefly takes birds into this studio after they have already been measured, weighed, and ringed. Always mindful of their well-being, she releases stressed birds immediately. She photographs others as they perch on carefully arranged branches placed before a white surface. The white backdrop, reminiscent of traditional ornithological illustrations, brings out every detail: the fine structure of the plumage, the alert gaze, the smallest movements.



STEPPE SYNANTHROPIES: EXTANT ACROSS CONTINENTS

Selbi Jumayeva (* 1986), Alisa Verbina (* 1995) and Olha Vinichenko (* 1998)

2024, Installation; Image: embroidered textile (linen and cotton blend, tulle, recycled parachute cord, and art silk. Mixed technique: computer and hand embroidery, photo prints on fabric), 300 cm diameter | without image: video performance, 5:19 min. | Ornithological artifacts: bird rings, ca. 1 cm; GPS-trackers, 7 cm; leg flags, 2 cm | Statement: photo print on textile, 58 × 79 cm; embroidered bird, tulle, 300 × 60 cm
Courtesy of the artists | © Alisa Verbina

“Free as a bird”: we think of boundlessness, independence, and mobility. However, bird populations have been declining for decades. However, many species simply lack the space to live, and the number of birds is declining worldwide. The Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*), for example, has long been extinct in Ukraine and China due to industrialization of agriculture; today the Kazakh steppe remains its last nesting ground. It depends on grazed grasslands shaped by semi-nomadic livestock farming.

In this multi-piece work, the lapwing appears as relative and fellow dweller. The image above shows a textile image, in which the artists trace lines of movement, based on satellite and GPS data from tracked birds and humans. *Steppe Synanthropies* combines traditional textile art with video, text, and objects from ornithological research. The artists explore a shared experience of resilience and vulnerability in the face of climate and humanitarian crises and the displacement of traditional ways of life – in this way they emphasize adaptation and responsible stewardship as possible paths for the future. In doing so, they also illustrate how the interplay of landscapes, knowledge, and practices sustains the fragile yet hopeful coexistence of humans and birds.

Ambivalent Relationships

Whose dignity do we recognize, and whose do we ignore? Pigeons and chickens are among the birds closest to us – but our relationship with them is deeply divided. At weddings, we release doves, but we accuse city pigeons of being “rats of the skies.” Chickens are welcome as a hobby in the garden or as a meal, but when eating, we quickly forget about factory farming.

The result is contradiction situated between fascination and disgust, between affection and exploitation. The city pigeon is considered annoying; the farm animal, practical. It is as though they were not individuals, as though they felt nothing.

The artworks in this section of the exhibition explore the transitions and boundaries of perception and evaluation, raising the question of what it is that conditions human compassion.



PIGEON AND AMARYLLIS

Vroni Schwegler (* 1970)

2023–24, oil on paper and canvas, sewn, 17 parts, various dimensions

Courtesy of Vroni Schwegler

© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026

Vroni Schwegler's images of pigeons make the supposedly familiar seem strange – thus allowing us to see it in a new light. With the motif of the pigeon, the artist has devoted herself to a subject that evokes ambivalent feelings. The animal belongs to the visual art canon as the Holy Spirit, as symbol of peace, and a carrier of messages. But the city pigeon is a nuisance to many that is to be shooed away or even killed. Therefore, it also symbolizes anthropogenic change – the transformation of the planet and its inhabitants through human influence. After all, it is humans who have caused the pigeons' problematic living conditions. The way these birds are treated demonstrates how quickly compassion disappears when it comes to “our” territory.

Schwegler has painted images of pigeons and cut these out. When removed from their context, the birds appear to be set in motion and suspended in space. She has sewn them together with red amaryllis. From a distance, the latter might evoke blood – perhaps that of a dead pigeon on the street. However, close, the blossom's splendor and vitality stand in stark contrast to the injured animal, whose sight is more familiar to us in urban spaces than is the body of many other birds.

PIGEON MINIATURES

Anna Yeliz Schentke (* 1990)

2025–26, drypoint on milk carton, various dimensions

Courtesy of Anna Yeliz Schentke

Have you ever seen an injured pigeon and wondered whether to help it or to just walk by? Writer Anna Yeliz Schentke is a member of *MainTauben e.V.*, a volunteer organization dedicated to rescuing and caring for orphaned, injured, and abused pigeons. In her texts written for this exhibition, she draws on her personal experiences of finding and caring for these animals, including moments of contact, feelings of helplessness, and grappling with responsibility in the face of her fellow creatures' suffering.



Podcast Art'n'Vielfalt



How can we view pigeons
in a new light?

With Vroni Schwegler and
Anna Yeliz Schentke

Local initiatives for the survival of birds in the city:

Maintauben

maintauben.de

Maintauben Tierschutzprojekt e.V. is a young, non-profit association based in Frankfurt am Main, whose aim is to sustainably improve the coexistence of humans and animals in Frankfurt for the mutual benefit of both.

Frankfurt City Pigeon Project

stadttaubenprojekt.de

A non-profit association that has set itself the goal of making human-pigeon coexistence more peaceful and to offer solutions for both.



HEINRICH (CRANIOCERVICAL)

Andreas Greiner (* 1979)

2015, two-part work, 32.5 × 23.8 cm each; image: photograph | without image:
contract between the artist and the Nusz children's farm, Berlin
Courtesy of the Spartakus Sammlung, Berlin
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026; photograph: Andreas Greiner & Theo Bitzer

In 2023 there were over 150 million chickens in Germany, nearly 90 million of which were broiler chickens¹ – more than the number of people living in the country. The domestic chicken is the most biologically successful bird worldwide, and its biomass exceeds that of the wild birds. Many of these enormous numbers of animals suffer throughout their short lives from inadequate space, monotony, and rapid weight gain. Most are not raised to live, but to produce eggs and then to be killed.

Andreas Greiner challenged this industrial logic by redeeming a fattened rooster and declaring it a living sculpture. He named it Heinrich and placed it on a children's farm. Removed from the industrial machinery and made part of a conceptual piece of art, the formerly anonymous farm animal became visible as a unique living being. Heinrich died in 2016, the year after his rescue. His death was a result of his functionally optimized body, which had been bred for extreme weight gain in the shortest possible time.

¹ [destatis.de/DE/Themen/Branchen-Unternehmen/Landwirtschaft-Forstwirtschaft-Fischerei/Tiere-Tierische-Erzeugung/Tabellen/betriebe-gefluegel-nutztiere](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Branchen-Unternehmen/Landwirtschaft-Forstwirtschaft-Fischerei/Tiere-Tierische-Erzeugung/Tabellen/betriebe-gefluegel-nutztiere), accessed February 2, 2026.



UNTITLED

Karin Kneffel (* 1957)

Untitled, 1993 (1993/71), oil on canvas, 20 × 20 cm | without image:

Untitled, 1991 (1991/04); *Untitled*, 1997 (1997/04); *Untitled*, 1997 (1997/05);

Untitled, 1997 (1997/06); *Untitled*, 1997 (1997/73); *Untitled*, 1997 (1997/75);

Untitled, 1997 (1997/76); *Untitled*, 1997 (1997/77), all oil on canvas, 20 × 20 cm each

Courtesy of the artist | © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026; photo: Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf

“What a vain rooster!” is what one might think when viewing some historical portraits. Rulers, nobles, and clergy commissioned portraits to demonstrate their power, status, and wealth. In art the portrait genre is the one most closely associated with (human) individuality. The image reveals how a person presents themselves, how they want to be seen, or how the portraitist perceives them.

But what does it mean to see a portrait of a creature that is incapable of representing itself in a painting and for whom the concept of individuality is probably foreign? In Karin Kneffel’s paintings, we encounter such creatures. Farm animals such as geese and chickens, that humans have bred for generations for their own purposes over generations, are shown here not only as specimens of their species, but also as characters with their own will and dignity. At the same time, the question arises: Who are we actually looking at – the bird or ourselves?



GLANCES

Ulrike Franke (* 1970) and Michael Loeken (* 1954)

2025, 4K video, 3:30 min.

Courtesy and © filmproduktion loekenfranke

In this exhibition, we see many birds from the human perspective. Here, however, those being observed are also visible as observers. Northern gannets (*Morus bassanus*) look directly into the camera – and we look into their eyes. What have they seen during their flights over land and sea, sometimes covering distances of up to 5,000 kilometers? How do they view us humans?

For their 2026 documentary, *WATCHING PEOPLE WATCHING BIRDS*, Ulrike Franke and Michael Loeken also filmed in Helgoland, where northern gannets have been breeding since 1991 (and building their nests with plastic waste, among other materials). The island has for decades been a hotspot for bird-watching, for professional ornithologists and amateurs alike. These recordings were made in 2023. That year bird flu also killed numerous wild birds. Surviving the disease may have caused a change in the northern gannets' appearance. Their eyes are naturally light blue, but some of the birds filmed have one blue eye and one jet-black eye.

Initial scientific speculation suggests that the formation of antibodies has led to this discoloration.

Bird's-Eye Views

How does our view of the world and coexistence with other species change when we see it from a bird's-eye view? Here, we do not mean "looking down from above." Even the view of a circling bird of prey is not just one seen from above. Due to the position and nature of their eyes, birds literally see the world differently. Human vision is more frontal. Birds probably perceive their surroundings more panoramically and also see different colors. Although we can never experience the world from a bird's-eye view, we can try to do so through careful observation, interpretation, and our imagination.

This section brings together images, music, and sound recordings depicting attempts to approximate how birds perceive their surroundings, communicate, and even what they dream. Ultimately, this raises questions about the potential and limitations of understanding, and our desire to comprehend the lives of animals.



NIGHTINGALE SINGING CONTEST

Sound recordings by Silke Kipper, April 28, 2006, 12:35 a.m., Treptow Park, Berlin

Courtesy of Silke Kipper

Photographs by Daniela Friebe, May 15 and June 11, 2017, Treptow Park

Courtesy of and © Daniela Friebe

Where nightingales establish their territory, the night becomes an auditory stage. Neighboring males often reference each other in their songs. Here you can hear a nocturnal song interaction between two males. This stereo recording was part of a research project on the role of “patterned responses.” Each male nightingale sings approximately 200 different types of verses. Neighbors share about two-thirds of these types. Therefore, the probability that they will sing the same type of verse at the same time by chance is very low. Do they use the same verses to communicate – in a friendly or aggressive way? In fact, the patterned responses and their timing (“interrupting” versus “singing alternatively”) seem to convey information. Playback experiments using two loudspeakers to simulate two “duet partners” or “duelists” revealed that the audience – female and male nightingales – listened to this exchange and learned about the two singing males. Therefore, it stands to reason that the two males are not performing their entire duet or duel for or against each other, but rather primarily for an audience – in a true singing competition!



TERRITORY

Daniela Friebel (* 1975)

2019, series of photographs and text pages with spectrograms

Image: *Territory #63 (Opelweg Popperstr)*, part of the *Territory* installation, 2026

(on display in the exhibition)

Courtesy and © Daniela Friebel

Can you hear boundaries? For nightingales, during certain times of the year, the answer is clearly: yes! Daniela Friebel traced their territories in Berlin – not with her eyes, but with her ears: Night after night she followed the birdsong to find the birds' territories. She mapped their positions and created her own special map of the city. Year after year, nightingales return to exactly the same spots – in bushes, vacant lots, and untidy corners. Gradually, the anonymous voices became familiar nightingale companions.

Friebel returned during the day to photograph the territories. Rather than showing animals, the photographs depict their habitats. These indirect portraits evoke singing, demarcation, and habitation. Here, the territory is presented as both a biological space and a temporary order – with boundaries that exist only as long as they are necessary.

Friebel's work also addresses issues and concerns related to photography, such as proximity and distance, cropping and perspective. How can a bush be portrayed? How does the perception of urban space change when a nightingale is known to live there? The photographs are supplemented by spectrograms, which are pictorial representations of nightingale songs recorded by Friebel. The result is a celebration of disorder – and a portrait of Berlin as a city of nightingales.

Mary Oliver

“What Gorgeous Thing”

I do not know what gorgeous thing
the bluebird keeps saying,
His voice easing out of his throat,
beak, body into the pink air
of the early morning. I like it
whatever it is. Sometimes,
it seems the only thing in the world
that is without dark thoughts.
Sometimes it seems the only thing
in the world that is without
questions that can't and probably
never will be answered, the
only thing that is entirely content
with the pink, then clear white
morning and, gratefully, says so.



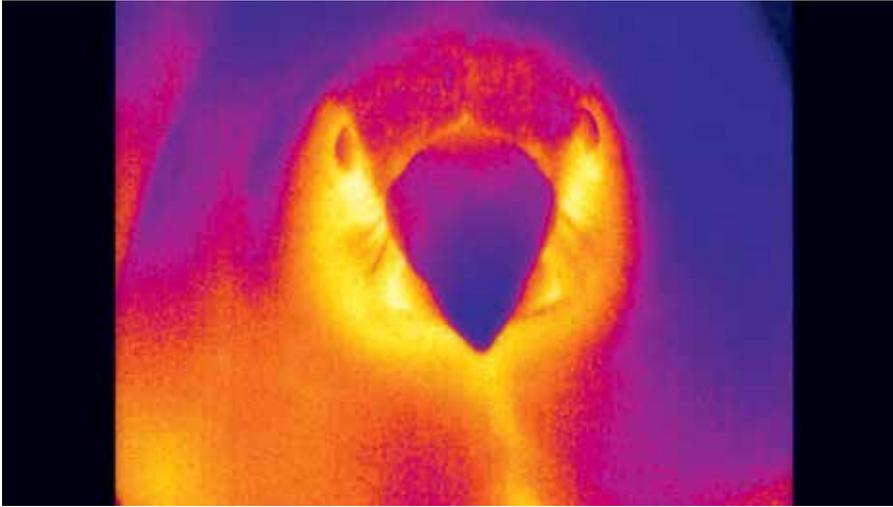
BIRDS

Volker Kreidler (* 1962)

2018, series of photographs, 75 × 58.5 cm, 142 × 110 cm, 75 × 58.5 cm

Courtesy and © Volker Kreidler

These photographs are three of the hundreds taken by Volker Kreidler at one of the world's oldest ornithological research stations, located in Rybatschi (formally Rositten) near Kaliningrad. For over a hundred years, birds have been ringed, weighed, and measured there. Nowadays they are also equipped with GPS transmitters. Through ringing, an anonymous wild animal enters the realm of human systems of order. The birds then become part of a large-scale observation project, in which humans attempt to understand their lives, movements and rhythms. Volker Kreidler was the last person at the observation station to hold the bird "in the hand." After taking the photograph, he released it. The bird in the hand symbolizes the inequality of bodies – and for the responsibility that humans, as beings that shape ecosystems, have toward their fellow creatures.



B5'S DREAM

Robin Meier Wiratunga (* 1980)

2025–2026, courtesy of the artist

© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026

Birds dream. Robin Meier's artistic work is based on scientific research on this topic. At the heart of it is the dream of a zebra finch recorded in spring of 2023. The bird, named B5 after the musical note, lived in the laboratory for around five years. Zebra finches are considered model organisms in experimental brain research. Meier Wiratung initially became interested in the research, but his focus gradually shifted to B5, the individual bird. The result is a portrait compiled from the data collected about B5 and other relevant information.

B5's Dream explores issues arising in the interplay between neuroscience, behavioral research, and artificial intelligence. It also considered significant questions that remain unanswered. What can we know? What means are ethically legitimate for gaining knowledge about living beings? How do we address the paradox that knowledge about the relationships between species often comes from capturing or killing of individual animals? How are technology and science changing our ideas about consciousness and perception?

Office and laboratory materials, laser-printed text excerpts and video stills

Dreamers, video loop (7 min.)

B5's Environment, video loop (10 min.)

The artistically staged desk came from the laboratory where research on B5 was carried out. On display are objects with which the bird came into contact with during its lifetime, such as a bathing bowl and a food dispenser. Videos of sleeping animals are shown on a monitor. Many species, including humans, dream while they sleep. But how do their dreams differ? A second monitor shows scenes of B5's everyday life in the laboratory, including the spaces, materials, gestures, and sounds that defined the bird's environment.

B5's Dream, hand-bound accordion-fold booklet depicting a stereo soundtrack (11 hours)

Research shows that birds often use the same areas of the brain for dreaming and for singing while awake. Though brain wave recordings and algorithmic analysis, researchers discovered that zebra finches dream of melodies that they sing days later. Eleven hours of B5's dreamtime are recorded in the accordion-fold booklet. The soundtrack renders these dream sounds audible and plays them in real time over the course of eleven hours. The sounds are separated according to the right and left brain hemispheres and played on the right and left speakers, respectively.

B5's Dream, generative video, (11 hours, synchronized with the accordion-fold sound diagram)

This video explores dreaming as a biological state experienced by humans and birds. Current research suggests that dreaming evolved very early in the evolutionary process – perhaps initially in birds or their ancestors. In this context, dreaming is considered a potential origin of consciousness shared by various species. The combination of laboratory recordings from the B5 environment, images of the sleeping bird, and artistically recreated dream sequences by Robin Meier Wiratunga does not reconstruct a specific dream. Rather, the video speculatively approaches dreaming as an interspace between biological process, memory, and perception.

Note: No animals were harmed or killed in the creation of this artistic work. It is based on previously existing data. However, in order to obtain this data, animals were kept in laboratories and injured through invasive procedures (to measure their brain waves). One of the goals of this work is to raise and discuss the question of the ethical legitimacy of such experiments.

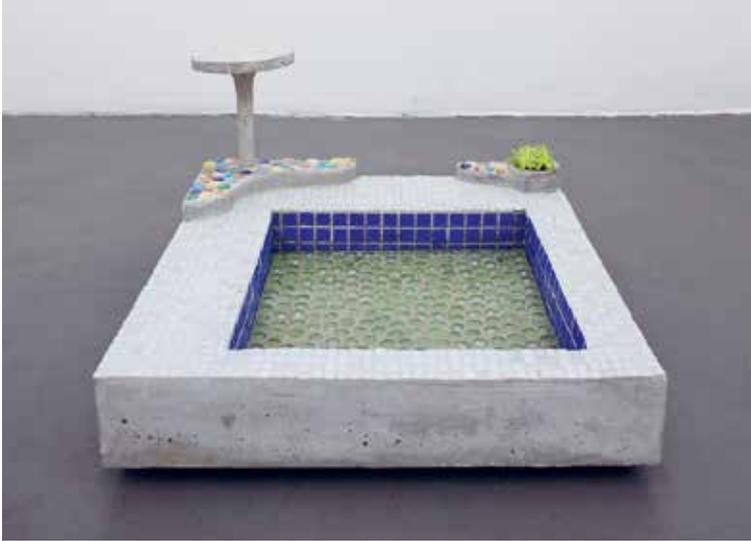
Podcast Art'n'Vielfalt 

What do birds dream about?

With Robin Meier Wiratunga
and Onur Güntürkün



Museum courtyard next to the lime tree



NEUTRA-POOL

Ina Weber (* 1964)

2017, reinforced concrete, tiles, glass pebbles, 51 × 51 × 28.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist | © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026

Some birds are great builders, yet they use puddles and other bodies of water for bathing and drinking, whether they are natural or human-made. This pool is finely tiled and equipped with seating and a feeding area. The title *Neutra Pool* alludes to Austrian-American architect Richard Neutra (1892–1970), who was one of the defining representatives of modernism in the United States. Developing in the early 20th century, modernism was an architectural movement characterized by functionality, reduction, and clarity that aimed to create better living conditions for everyone.

Neutra's "VDL Research House" (built in 1932 / rebuilt after a fire in 1966), is considered an architectural icon – partly due to the intertwining of interior and exterior spaces through the use of mirrors, roof terraces, and shallow water basins. Ina Weber translates these fundamental concepts into a miniature that evokes modern buildings in its formal language and materiality, yet is rendered absurd by its reduced scale. Displaying the miniature outdoors also emphasizes the unique and overlapping needs of different species.

Who's chirping there? Helpful hints for becoming more familiar with birds

Collins Bird Guide.

By Killian Mullarney, Lars Svensson, and Dan Zetterström.

An essential field guide for birdwatchers of all skill levels. 2023

NABU Vogelwelt

App primarily for birds breeding in Germany

Merlin Bird ID

AI-powered app for recognizing bird calls, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

merlin.allaboutbirds.org

Dawn Chorus

Citizen science and art project about bird calls

dawn-chorus.org

eBird

Global platform for birdwatching, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

ebird.org/home

Ornitho.de

Online platform for birdwatching in Germany, Dachverband Deutscher Avifaunisten e.V.

ornitho.de

Podcast recommendation:

Reingezwitschert – The NABU Bird podcast (in German)

The podcast features tips for bird lovers, fun facts about the bird world, and plenty of chirping for your home, balcony, and yard.

nabu.de/wir-ueber-uns/infothek/33144.html

Spend an hour counting birds

Twice a year, NABU and its Bavarian partner, the Landesbund für Vogel- und Naturschutz (LBV, State Association for Bird and Nature Conservation), call on nature lovers to spend an hour counting birds in their yards, on their balconies, or in parks, and to report their findings. This helps to identify trends, population developments, and regional differences, thereby supporting nature conservation.

nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/aktionen-und-projekte/stunde-der-gartenvoegel/index.html

Upcoming dates:

May 8–10, 2026: Yard Bird Counting

January 8–10, 2027: Winter Bird Counting

nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/aktionen-und-projekte/stunde-der-gartenvoegel/index.html

What can I do for birds?



Birds share our habitats – often they are closer than we realize. Cities have become important habitats for many bird species. Buildings substitute for rocky faces, parks and yards provide sustenance. At the same time, noise, light, glass facades, and impervious surfaces pose major dangers. How well birds can live in the city greatly depends on human decisions – from our architecture to our daily routines. Even small changes can help improve their living conditions.



Make your windows visible

Each year, around 100 million birds die from colliding with window panes. Stickers, markings, or (light colored) curtains can significantly reduce collisions. nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/voegel/helfen/01079.html#zuhause

Provide water

A shallow water bowl on the balcony or in the yard allows birds to drink and bathe, especially during hot and dry periods. Water is more important than food in the summer.

Create habitats

The courage to allow some “messiness” in yards and public spaces is more important than providing feeding stations (which in cities usually only serve 10 to 15 endangered bird species). Unkempt corners with dead wood, brush piles, and wild herbs (aka “weeds”) are teeming with life. With this in mind, leave the nettles alone: They are eaten by more than 30 species of caterpillars, which in turn are food for birds. Instead of exotic species (such as cherry laurel) plant native shrubs (such as elderberry, hawthorn, cornelian cherry), as well as wild plants (daisies, yarrow, lemon balm). Avoid pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and herbicides in your yard altogether. Delay spring cleaning: Wait until mid-April or May to tidy up, allowing wild bees, butterflies, and insects to overwinter in the plant stems. Don't rake away all the leaves. They provide winter protection for soil organisms and act as a natural fertilizer.



Respect nesting sites

Breeding seasons usually occur between spring and summer. During this time, hedges, facades, and roofs should not be disturbed. While watching birds breed can be fascinating, keep in mind that potential nest predators, including crows, magpies, and domestic cats, are very good at following lines of sight. Therefore, nests should only be observed from a distance and very inconspicuously.

Incidentally, NABU awards a plaque for swallow-friendly houses – and in some regions provides assistance when swallows do build their nests. The organization offers advice on mounting the nests and installing droppings boards. Please contact your local group for more information.
nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/aktionen-und-projekte/schwalbenfreundliches-haus/index.html

Observing instead of intervening

A young bird that appears to be sitting alone is often not abandoned. Intervention is rarely necessary, with observation from a distance usually being better than active help. However, swifts are an exception to this rule. Young swifts found on the ground always need human assistance because adult birds do not feed them outside of the nest. Please do not try to care for injured birds yourself, but hand them over to qualified people, such as wild bird and wildlife rescue services.

Help for swifts in the Rhine-Main area

Swift Clinic, German Association for the Protection of Swifts
mauersegler.com

Founder and director, Dr. Christiane Haupt, received the Animal Welfare Award in 2025 for her life's work. The association's goals include: preserving existing breeding colonies, creating new nesting opportunities, preventing dangers caused by civilization, providing professional veterinary care for injured swifts, restoring their ability to live in the wild, and raising orphaned swifts in a species-appropriate manner.

The situation of bird life

Birds are important indicator species for the state of ecosystems. This makes it all the more alarming that their numbers are declining worldwide: About half of all bird species are in decline, with only 6% showing an increase (as of 2022). *The State of the World's Birds* report (2022) indicates that between 1980 and 2017, the breeding bird population of 378 species in the European Union declined between 17 and 19%, resulting in a net loss of 560 to 620 million bird individuals. Bird species living in agricultural landscapes are particularly affected, with pesticide use and monocultures destroying their habitats.

What needs to happen for birds to thrive again?

Konstantin Kreiser (Head of Nature Conservation at NABU) said in August 2025: "Three things: First, implement a consistently ecologically oriented agricultural policy that rewards farms for supporting the natural environment and does not disadvantage them. Second, invest in restoring destroyed habitats, as provided for in the EU Renaturation Act, which was launched exactly one year ago. And third, there must be more protection and care for protected areas."

<https://www.riffreporter.de/deumweltvogelschutzbericht-deutschland-naturschutz-klimawandel-artenvielfalt-monitoring>, accessed February 19, 2026.



More information

Die Flugbegleiter (The Flight Attendants), research collective, part of the Riffreporter eG

riffreporter.de/de/genossenschaft/recherche-kollektive/flugbegleiter-ornithologie

Nationaler Vogelschutzbericht des Bundesamts für Naturschutz

(National Bird Protection Report of the Federal Agency for Nature Preservation)

Published every six years

bfm.de/nationale-vogelschutzberichte

bfm.de/vogelmonitoring



2025 Bird Protection Report: nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/voegel/gefaehrdungen/36686.html

State of the World's Birds

A. C. Lees, L. Haskell, T. Allinson et al. (2022), "State of the World's Birds." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, doi: 47:231-260.



Bird's-Eye Views – The Birds and Us

March 22 – August 9, 2026

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Museum Sinclair-Haus

Löwengasse 15, 61348 Bad Homburg v. d. H.

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The Idea-Booklet of the Art
Education available
for download



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Bird's-Eye Views
The Birds and Us

Hosted by Marilena Berends

Discussions with Matthias Garff and Silke Hartmann,
Vroni Schwegler and Anna Yeliz Schentke
Robin Meier Wiratunga and Onur Güntürkün



