

## Birds and the Built Environment: Towards Reconciliation

Since 1970, North America has lost 29% of its bird population, due largely to human modification of the environment. Habitat loss is a primary culprit, but bird strikes with architecture or other manmade structures account for between 700 million and 1 billion birds deaths annually.



David Ouellete, *Wrapped Warbler*, 2018

At College of DuPage, many birds have left their mark on our art building, installing their nests—woven concave homes—in and on the facilities' equipment, and even inside a former student's sculpture. These sympoetic moments of co-making present a glimpse into a possible shared future for humans and nonhumans. This reconciliation is the focus of my conversation with artist Alice Hargrave, writer and editor Gavin van Horn, and naturalist Stephanie Touzalin.

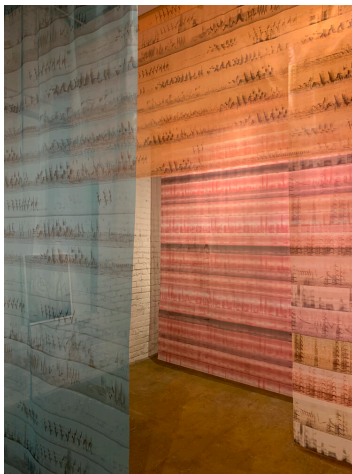
Before we all began teaching and learning remotely as a result of the pandemic, I used to repeat the same morning circuit each day when arriving on campus. After parking my car, I walked around the backside of the brutalist MacAninch Arts Center building, along a narrow sidewalk lining the glass-sheathed art studios. These towering glass walls face east, and I was frequently met by a variety of birds, taking advantage of the morning sun over DeShane Pond and the easternmost edges of our restored prairie. Many small birds, including finches, chickadees, warblers, and thrushes, and larger migrating birds like Canadian geese and mallard ducks are common. Geese are so common that a previous college administration had installed spike strips along the window sills—hostile architecture—to keep the birds from resting, or perhaps roosting, on the weathered concrete suspended above the water; I imagine, a great place for a goose.

I vividly remember one chilled October morning when I found two dead pine warblers and a badly injured hermit thrush who had struck the glass. I wrapped the warblers in white napkins and buried them behind the art building. The thrush was stunned, so I took her up the street to Willowbrook Wildlife Center, where she was taken in with great care. Only later, upon calling the center did I learn that this particular bird had died from the injuries to her head and neck. A swell of grief washed over me; her death served as a stark reminder of the transience of all lives.



Houdon, *The Dead Thrush*, 1782

The ordeal recalled a snowy February afternoon perusing the hallways of my favorite industrialist-mansion-turned-art-museum in New York City, the Frick Collection. While walking through the portico gallery, with thick, downy snowflakes cascading in the courtyard outside, I encountered Jean-Antoine Houdon's 1782 sculpture, "*The Dead Thrush*." I was moved to tears by the lifeless body of the small bird, suspended from her legs by a finely-carved marble ribbon. Houdon's goal was likely allegorical, but in that moment, I could only mourn.



Alice Hargrave, *Pink Noise*, 2019

An animal's life matters as much to them as ours do to us. We encounter dead animals as frequently as live ones, it seems. These moments put a fine point on the ethical considerations nonhuman animals deserve as we remake the world, and what is required of us to fulfill those considerations. These experiences led me to Alice's work. Her sheer, billowing fabrics, immersive soundscapes, and photographic installations are captivating, but also contain a sense of purpose and a poetic embrace of the obligation to put her work "to work" for animals.

- David Ouellette

## Resources for students and teachers:

Alice Hargrave

<https://www.alicehargrave.com>

Gavin van Horn, Center for Humans and Nature

<https://www.humansandnature.org/gavin-van-horn>

<https://storyforager.com>

Essay - Horn, Gavin Van. "Shagbark Thoughts." In *The Way of Coyote: Shared Journeys in the Urban Wilds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Stephanie Touzalin, Willowbrook Wildlife Center

<https://www.dupageforest.org/willowbrook-wildlife-center>

<https://www.dupageforest.org/things-to-do/school-programs/meet-the-experts>

Chicago Bird Collision Monitors

<https://www.birdmonitors.net>

Bird Friendly Chicago

<https://birdfriendlychicago.org>

Cornell Ornithology Lab

<https://research.cornell.edu/content/lab-ornithology>

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org>

<https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org>

Building for the birds - Joanna Eckles - TEDx

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xD\\_7n0WJ1Y&t=236s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xD_7n0WJ1Y&t=236s)

Why are Glass Buildings Bird Killers? - ARTiculations

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm55DG\\_KNAc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm55DG_KNAc)

"Chicago tops list of most dangerous cities for migrating birds."

<https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2019/04/chicago-tops-list-most-dangerous-cities-migrating-birds>