

How Pesticides Menace Birds

Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life?

-Rachel Carson

It's a sunny spring day and an airplane is flying over a farmer's field spraying pesticides.

Some of the birds inhabiting patches of woods nearby the fields will be poisoned when they fly through the toxic mist as it drifts in the wind. Some will be poisoned by chemicals that settle in puddles they



drink and bath in. Some will get chemicals on their feathers that are on the material they build their nests with and get poisoned as they preen their feathers.

Some of the poisoned birds will convulse in the air and die as they fall to the ground. Some that are dazed by the chemicals will die as they fly into buildings or cars. Others will lose weight, sing less, fail to attract a mate, suffer impaired immunity and become easy prey for predators.

Many of the birds will suffer impaired memory and forget the migratory route and wintering ground.

Some of the mother birds will lose their parenting instinct, abandoning and not watching their nests, or failing to provide adequate food for their chicks. Some of the females will have reproductive failure, pesticides in their eggs and smaller broods. Pesticides on the nests will absorb into the naked skin of newly hatched birds, making the young birds less responsive to their mother's calls and growing less.

At least 670 million birds are directly exposed to pesticides each year on U.S. farms and at least 10 percent of those, 67 million, are killed, according to Dr. David Pimental, a professor of ecology and agriculture at Cornell University. This is a "very conservative estimate" since it does not include the young birds that die in the nest when their parents die or when they are fed pesticide-contaminated insects, he said.

Over the last 30 years, pesticides, as well as habitat loss, have contributed to steep declines in farm birds on the British countryside, according to The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Tree sparrows have declined by 95%, corn buntings by 88%, grey partridges by 86%, turtle doves by 71%, linnets by 56%,

reed buntings by 53 %, yellowhammers by 53% and lapwings by 40%, according to the organization.