

Making Ripples

Create Bird-friendly Windows

by Amanda Bancroft

Whack! A loud thud snaps you awake. Nothing appears to be amiss, and after listening for awhile, you go about your business. But the following week, a mockingbird begins suicide bombing its beak against all the windows on one side of the house, angrily attacking the glass. What's going on?

Birds often can't detect windows, which reflect the sky, shrubs and trees outside, creating the illusion of space to fly. Since many birds also can't recognize their own reflection, they see what looks like another bird trespassing upon their territory. This occurs with particular frequency in the spring when bird hormones surge and nesting territories are being defined and defended.

Some birds are only stunned by these encounters. Others appear remarkably uninjured, but expend so much energy fighting their reflection that it affects their health. Many birds hit windows and immediately fall prey to outdoor cats and predators, or are killed later, out of sight of the building. This makes it difficult to track exactly how many birds are killed by collisions, but estimates are around a billion, according to the American Ornithological Society. It's a bigger problem for threatened migratory birds trapped in a maze of skyscrapers, but still, residential neighborhoods can help.

Screened windows are typically not a problem, and picture windows are the worst offenders. Having a great view and lowering bird mortality are fairly conflicting goals, but at least we now know that window stickers which obscure the view are not very effective. They're tiny, and typically need to be spaced four inches apart to deter birds. If you have a bird feeder, placing it either within three feet or further than 30 feet from the window works best (suctioning the feeder to the window is ideal). These distances were determined by studies to be the safest for the birds, which can't get up enough momentum to injure themselves in less than three feet and seem to recognize houses and windows better from a distance.

If you need a quick DIY fix, try rubbing streaks of bar soap across the outside glass, hanging strips of any common household material like yarn four inches apart in front of the window on the outside, or let the kids (or the kid inside) enjoy drawing on the glass with colorful window markers! There are products recommended by the American Bird Conservatory that appear to be successful. These include ABC BirdTape (translucent tape), Acopian BirdSavers (see-through curtains), CollidEscape (window film that lets you see out but appears solid from outside), Feather Friendly (adhesive dots), Solyx Bird-Safety Film (window film in horizontal or vertical stripes), and Window Alert (UV-reflecting decals visible to birds but not easy to see for humans). Space didn't allow for a full review and pricing of products, but a quick Google search using these terms should show you which is best to make your windows as bird-friendly as possible.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.