

Monitoring data collected by the Audobon Society and U.S. Geological Survey show clearly that songbird populations are declining throughout the United States. The most popular current culprit is climate change. Recent British studies have shown that the geographic range of many birds is slowly shifting northward, also presumably as a result of climate change. The reproductive ecology of birds is climate-sensitive. Eggs must hatch when there is abundant food for chicks. For birds in temperate regions, the peak supply of food for chicks is seasonal. If chicks hatch too early, or too late, their survival is low. Some bad years are inevitable, for birds as well as gardeners! But more changing, unpredictable climate patterns can “fool” birds and lead to a greater frequency of unsuccessful breeding years.

Our colonial seabirds are especially vulnerable, since they must migrate and nest in time for the seasonal emergence and migrations of small schooling fish such as herring and sand lance. Surges of young fish have been very erratic over the past five years that we have been collecting data in the islands. This year Lopez experienced a vast influx of juvenile sand lance in mid-July that persisted through August. It was a boon for juvenile Chinook salmon in our waters, but it was too late for nesting seabirds.