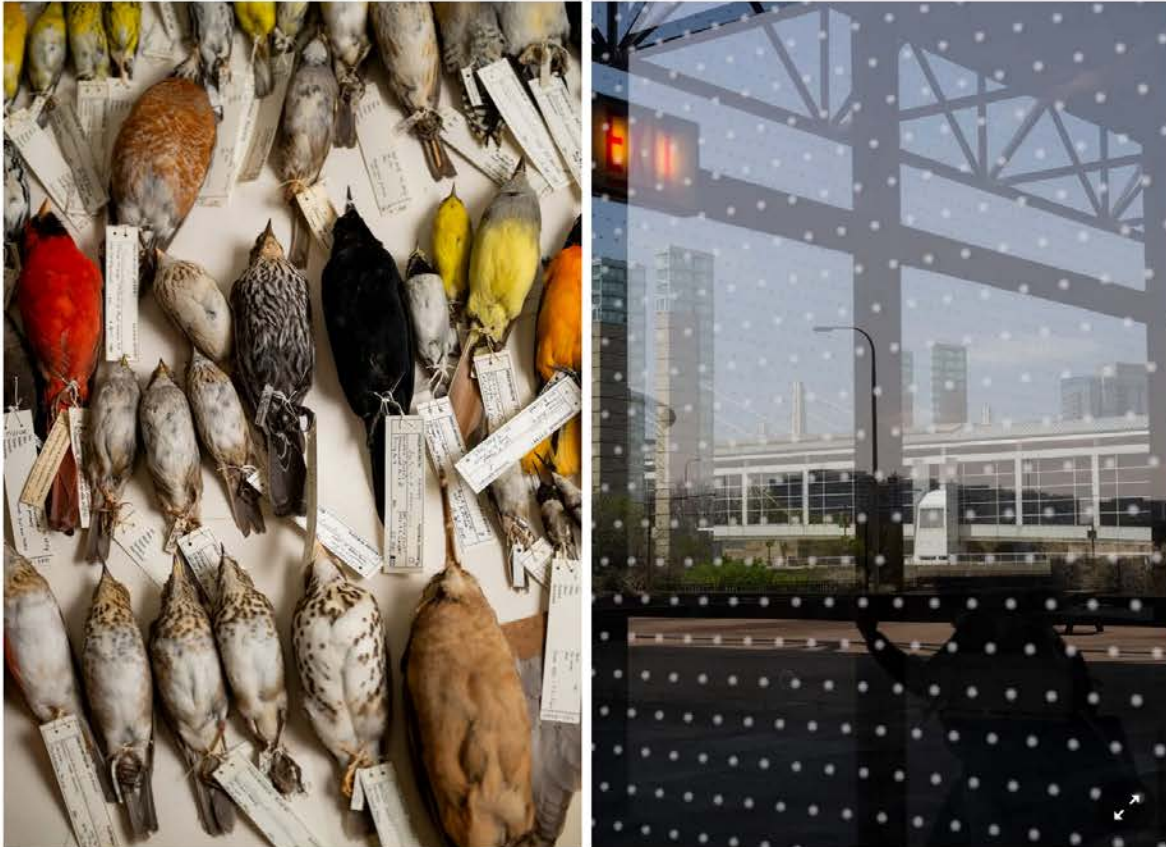


50 STATES, 50 FIXES

An Illinois Building Was a Bird Killer. A Simple Change Made a World of Difference.

Chicago is one of the most dangerous cities in the United States for migrating birds, and a glassy lakefront conference center was especially lethal.



Windows at the McCormick Place conference center on the Chicago lakefront were treated with a pattern to prevent bird strikes.

By [Catrin Einhorn](#) Photographs by Vincent Alban
Reporting from Chicago

The morning promised to be deadly.

High above Chicago, in the predawn dark, flew an airborne river of migratory birds. It was peak spring migration traffic, in late April, and the tiny travelers were arriving at one of the most perilous points along their journey.

These birds, inhabitants of forests and grasslands, do not perceive glass as solid and get confused by its reflections. Bright city lights seem to attract them, luring them into glassy canyons. The gleaming buildings of Chicago, curving along the shore of Lake Michigan, are especially lethal.

50 States, 50 Fixes is [a series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

A call went out to volunteers across the city: Be ready to hit the streets early to rescue the injured and document the dead.

But at the building that has long been the city's most notorious bird killer, a sprawling lakefront conference venue that claimed almost a thousand birds on a single day in October 2023, new protections were in place.

The vast glass windows and doors of the building, called Lakeside Center at McCormick Place, are overlaid with a pattern of close, opaque dots. Applied last summer to help birds perceive the glass, the treatment's early results are nothing short of remarkable. During fall migration, deaths were down by about 95 percent when compared with the two previous autumns.

Now monitoring is underway during the first spring migration since the dots, with implications for glassy structures far beyond Chicago. Across North America, with Toronto an early leader, a growing number of bird-friendly policies and decisions by individual building managers are helping make cities safer for birds.

On that recent morning, David Willard, an ornithologist at the Field Museum, set off on a lakefront path toward McCormick Place. Known as the Bird Man to workers there, Dr. Willard has been tallying the building's avian victims for almost 50 years.



David Willard, an ornithologist at the Field Museum in Chicago, on a Tuesday morning in late April.



The glass treatment was applied in a hectic three-month period last summer to be in place for fall migration.

It wasn't yet 6 a.m., and he wondered aloud about what he would find. As he walked, white-throated sparrows flitted around shrubs, a Baltimore oriole called from a tree and a green heron flew by. The park seemed full of returning birds.

If there were to be casualties at McCormick despite the treatment, Dr. Willard said, it would be on a morning like this one.

"This is a good test," he said.

The Deadliest Known Building

Researchers have [estimated that hundreds of millions of birds die](#) hitting buildings every year in the United States. These strikes are believed to be [one of the factors behind](#) an almost 30 percent drop in North American birds since 1970.

Chicago is one of the most dangerous cities in the country for migrating birds, according to [research by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#). And no building was known to be more lethal than McCormick Place's Lakeside Center.

Dr. Willard has been cataloging the dead there since 1978, when he was the Field Museum's collection manager for birds. He had heard that migrators sometimes ran into McCormick and, one morning before work, he decided to check it out. Below the glass were two dead birds.

"I sometimes wonder if I hadn't found anything, whether I would have ever gone back," Dr. Willard said.

He started daily monitoring during migrations in 1982. From that year through 2024, he and colleagues have documented 41,789 birds killed by the glass at McCormick.

Over the years, as the death toll mounted, advocates pushed for changes. McCormick managers said they tried a series of interventions: In the 1980s, strips of netting; in the '90s, bird-of-prey calls and silhouettes. They commissioned a nine-acre park of native prairie and woodlands on the roof of a lower parking deck, hoping it would draw birds away from the glass.

Closing curtains during events, though, was a step too far.

“For us, our priority was making sure that our customers were satisfied,” said Larita Clark, chief executive of the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, the municipal corporation that owns McCormick Place. “They rent space like this from us because of the view of the lake.”



Birds, most of which died after striking McCormick Place, in a Field Museum freezer.



A gray catbird that was killed when it flew into the building.

Hundreds of birds continued to die each year during spring and fall migrations. Often, it was a few each morning, but sometimes dozens in a day.

Then, on Oct. 5, 2023, Dr. Willard climbed the lakefront steps to the building's walkway on his routine inspection to find it littered with dead and injured birds. Shocked by the sheer volume, struggling to save the living while gathering the dead, he called a colleague for help.

“They were continuing to crash as we were picking them up,” Dr. Willard recalled. The casualties were mostly warblers, but also thrushes, sparrows and others. On the way back to the museum, they carried plastic bags bulging with roughly 975 dead birds.

50 States, 50 Fixes



Minnesota Teens Are Fighting Climate Anxiety With Shovels

May 20, 2025



From Oregon, a Chocolate Cake That Changes Hearts and Minds

May 20, 2025



Virginians Are Restoring a Forest Economy Built on Herbs and Tradition

May 20, 2025



How a Water Conservation Idea Won Over Oklahoma Farmers

May 20, 2025

‘What Can We Do?’

As [news of the episode ricocheted](#) around the world, public outrage was unlike anything the managers at McCormick had seen. Calls and emails poured in. The American Bird Conservancy took out a full-page ad in the Chicago Tribune with a headline reading: “One Night. One Building. 1,000 Birds Dead.”

Ms. Clark said she reached out to the Field Museum, federal wildlife officials and bird advocacy groups with a question: “What can we do so that this will never happen again?”

Some of the earliest research on how to make glass safer for birds was conducted by Daniel Klem Jr., an ornithologist at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa. He found that falcon silhouettes were not effective. Birds did not register them as predators and simply flew into the adjacent glass. Instead, to effectively deter birds, the glass needed a pattern over its entire surface. A distance of no more than two inches would prevent even tiny hummingbirds from trying to dart through, he said.

Eventually Ms. Clark and her team decided on the dots. The treatment cost \$1.2 million, paid for by the state of Illinois. Ms. Clark chose the pattern herself, and it was installed in a hectic three-month period last summer to be in place for fall migration.

Visitors don’t seem to even notice the dots from the inside, she said. She knows of no pushback.

But one problem area remains: a transparent pedestrian bridge that was not treated. It’s a tiny area compared with the two football fields of dotted glass, but it now claims an outsize number of the

Editors’ Picks



Ralph Lauren, ‘The Gilded Age’ and Black Affluence



Fast, Fresh Lettuce Wraps Feel Special Wherever You Are



How Does Taylor Swift Deal With Internet Noise?

victims. Of 49 bird deaths at McCormick last fall, 27 had struck the bridge.

Managers at McCormick are still deciding whether to treat it.

“We’re waiting on some data,” said Pat Allen, who oversees operations at the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority.

“We’ve got to justify what we’re spending.”



Pat Allen, head of operations at the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, the municipal corporation that owns McCormick Place, and Larita Clark, the chief executive.



Two Different Scenes

On the recent spring morning at McCormick, the sky still orange with sunrise, one bird lay dead under treated glass: a gray catbird. But Dr. Willard and I watched as dozens more flew toward the windows and, as they got close, seemed to put on the brakes, pulling up or veering away.

“My feeling is that in the past those would have probably hit and, at least some portion of them, died,” Dr. Willard said.

Walking around the mammoth building, there were no more casualties beneath the treated windows. But at the untreated glass of the pedestrian bridge, it was another story.

Four birds lay on the pavement, almost in a row, and Dr. Willard knelt to pick each one up. The dead went into a plastic bag. One, a white-throated sparrow, came around in his hands, trying to flutter away, and he carefully placed it in a paper bag to be released closer to the lake.

Farther along, we came upon three more dead birds and another stunned one, all casualties of the untreated glass on the bridge. Two were bright yellow warblers called common yellowthroats, perhaps on their way back from Central America or the Caribbean.

It was evidence that the bridge needs the film dots, too, Dr. Willard said.

Word of the treatment’s effectiveness is already traveling throughout the city and beyond.

“It started last fall when some of the results were coming out,” said Paul Groleau, vice president of Feather Friendly, the company that manufactured the window dots. “I had people emailing me directly saying, ‘We want what McCormick Place put on the building.’”

Conservationists are using the building’s success as they continue a longtime campaign to implement a bird-friendly design ordinance in Chicago.

“I think that may win the day for us in City Hall,” said Annette Prince, director of Chicago Bird Collision Monitors. “This is not just a maybe fix, this is going to make a significant difference in bird mortality, and McCormick Place is the poster child.”





throat that was found near the Lakeside Center beneath the untreated glass of a pedestrian bridge. It was only after released.

Tell Us About Solutions Where You Live

We're telling one story from every U.S. state, and we'd love to hear from you. *

What are we looking for? Stories of people, groups, organizations, strategies or innovations that are fixing environmental problems, from the state level down to the backyard. We won't publish anything without your permission.

0 words

What's your name? *

If we'd like to know more, we'll reach out.

What state are you in? *

Just in case you didn't mention it already.

