

After the Storm, Birds are Resilient but Habitats Change

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Devastating coastal storms don't just wreak havoc on human communities but they also severely damage habitat for coastal bird communities.

Big storm events scatter birds just as they do people and we notice mortality events especially with migrating birds encountering severe weather. Birds that require low coastal areas such as marshes, dunes and beaches are displaced. This can result in long-term habitat effects. Barrier islands, beaches and bars are flattened and reshaped, impacting breeding habitat of coastal birds such as Piping Plovers and Least Terns.

The same storm event that eliminates coastal bird breeding habitat in one area may also improve habitat by sand deposition in another area, so in many cases, coastal birds are inconvenienced for a short time, but ride it out and discover new breeding areas.

Disturbance and coastal reshaping is part of the ecosystem process and birds have evolved to deal with it. However, the increasing impacts of sea level rise intensify the effects of coastal storms and may, in the end, have a much more destructive impact on our bird species.

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Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn't people feel as free to delight in whatever sunlight remains to them?

—Rose Kennedy

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This heron, normally a marsh wader on the ground, was spotted on an osprey platform after "Superstorm" Sandy. Photo credit: Juliana Barrett.

