Audubon looks at how climate change threatens birds

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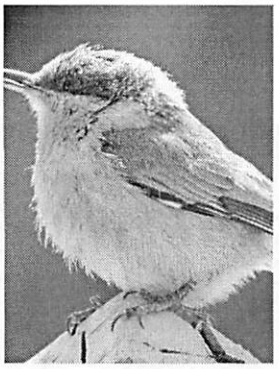

(Photo: Special to the Citizen-Times)

ASHEVILLE – Climate change isn't just a problem to ponder on Earth Day, or for those living near rising shorelines and receding coastlines, or those in parched stretches of California, or cities in the path of severe snowstorms and hurricanes.

The ever-rising temperature of the Earth's atmosphere linked to a plethora of greenhouse gases is also becoming a serious issue for the bird world.

That is according to a recent National Audubon study on climate change and members of the Asheville-based Elisha Mitchell Audubon Society, which will host a free presentation at 7 Tuesday night at the Reuter Center at UNC Asheville, titled "Save the Songs: Birds and Climate Change."

Audubon North Carolina Executive Director Heather Starck Hahn, based in Chapel Hill, will present Audubon's Climate Report released last September that addresses the greatest threat to bird populations. This will be the first time Hahn has addressed the local Audubon chapter, said Elisha Mitchell president, Tom Tribble, so he is expecting a large crowd.

"Climate change and global warming can be a controversial issue for some, but the Audubon Society is the cross-cut of politics: Everybody in the society is concerned about birds," Tribble said. "Many species that breed and live in North Carolina are really going to be threatened. Many of our children and grandchildren might not see the same birds we see today, and that's really a tragedy."

Hahn for the past couple of months has been traveling the state, visiting with the 10 Audubon North Carolina chapters and its 13 members and anyone else interested in birds to discuss the study, its magnitude, and what the average human can do to help their feathered friends.

"The study outlines the relationship between our North American birds and climate change," Hahn said. "We studied 588 species of North American bird species, and out of those, we found 314 were threatened or endangered by climate change alone. About 214 of those are found in North Carolina. So we have a really big responsibility here in North Carolina."

The report was based on the analysis of data on birds dating back 100 years. The result is that shrinking and shifting ranges linked to climate change could imperil nearly half of the breeding birds in the United States within the next 70 years. To put the number of bird species in peril — 314 — in perspective, Tribble said, only about 750 native birds are found in North America and fewer actually breed in North America.

Many people assume birds will not be affected by climate change because they can fly to find more suitable habitat if theirs is lost, he said.

"Birds may fly inland in the face of sea level rise, they may fly north to find suitable climate and habitat or they move up in elevation," Tribble said. "True, but the reality is that the solution is not so simple. The appropriate habitat and climate may not be available inland or further north. After all, we humans take up a lot of space — to live and to grow our own food. And birds that nest at Mount Mitchell can't fly any higher. We have already drastically reduced the the natural range of birds."

The Cerulean warbler is projected to lose 98 percent of summer range and might need to move to a higher elevation rather than moving farther north, Hahn said. She also said the brown-headed nuthatch, commonly found in the mountains, is an example of one of the 314 endangered birds found in the study.

"From a climate standpoint alone, not even talking about habitat, the brown-headed nuthatch is predicted to lose almost 95 percent of its current summer range. That's just hard to even wrap your head around," Hahn said.

"The nuthatch has a relationship with pine trees," she said. "We know short term we can make sure there is a healthy population as our biologists have started to see dips in this population in areas in the Southeast. We already started a program to start nest boxes for the nuthatches. This is something anyone can do to help this bird, by helping this population stay more robust."

As more science is gathered and if the birds lose a bigger percentage of their range, Hahn said, they will look at more mid- and long-term plans to bridge the gap for the nuthatches.

"I will also be letting our members know that we're going to be working on this together and this doesn't have to be the fate for our birds," Hahn said.

"We'll be launching big initiatives and doing everything we can to make sure our birds aren't so severely affected by climate change."

IF YOU GO

The Elisha Mitchell Audubon Society will host the free "Save the Songs: Birds and Climate Change" with Audubon North Carolina Executive Director Heather Hahn at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Reuter Center at UNC Asheville. For more, visit www.emasnc.org (http://www.emasnc.org/).

For more on the Audubon North Carolina Climate Report, visit www.audubon.org/climate (http://www.audubon.org/climate).

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