

From: [REDACTED]
To: [Clerks](#)
Subject: Letter to Council
Date: October 16, 2024 1:27:39 PM

Hello Mayor Taylor and Members of Council,

I am writing to you today in response to the deputation given on September 16th, 2024, regarding backyard bird feeding, specifically [item 6.3](#) on the agenda, as well as item 7.2 on today's agenda regarding proposed changes to the Animal Control Bylaw.

The individual who spoke on September 16th presented Council with a plethora of information largely based on her personal feelings and opinions around backyard bird feeding. I would do the opposite and provide you with facts and figures drawn from scientific study. I would encourage you to visit the links I have provided to learn more about biodiversity loss, population decline, and what we can do to affect change.

According to the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Report ([summarized here](#)), in the last 50 years the world has seen an average **68%** drop in mammal, bird, fish, reptile, and amphibian populations. North America specifically has witnessed biodiversity loss of **33%** in that time. Reports from the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) tell us that since 1970 a staggering **2.9 billion** birds have been lost, leaving many species in steep population decline. For example, the red-winged blackbird. We are all familiar with the red-winged blackbird as the first heralds of spring, arriving in flocks which can number in the thousands. But in only 5 decades their numbers have declined by an estimated 92 million birds.

According to [Birds Canada](#), nearly three quarters of the bird species that can be found in Canada move beyond our borders each year as part of their annual migration. Many areas they migrate to face even more dire circumstances as a result of habitat loss, invasive species, pesticide use, and the overall effects of climate change, like the recent devastation caused by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. The environmental pressures facing wildlife populations around the globe are immense. Due to their migratory nature, often travelling thousands of kilometres each year, birds are more often and directly impacted by change.

The realities of the climate crisis have led to the creation of a new term; ecological grief, which is the sense of loss that arises from experiencing or learning about environmental destruction or climate change. Many of us feel helpless in the face of vast and sweeping changes that must be made at levels much higher than the average person. Thankfully there are many actions that we as individuals can take to make a difference and one of those actions is creating wildlife friendly habitats in our own yards.

Beyond offering abundant resources on preservation and protection, the Canadian Wildlife Federation also gives people the opportunity to have their property designated a [Certified Wildlife Friendly Habitat](#). Among the requirements for eligibility is providing food sources, and while this can be done to some extent by planting native species, the application specifically asks if supplemental feeders are provided and promotes responsible backyard bird feeding. There are hundreds of Certified properties across Canada and approximately **40** just within the borders of Newmarket. Yards like this have become essential to wildlife as spaces occupied by humans rapidly become food deserts, covered with pavement, expansive lawns, and gardens filled with non-native ornamental plants. The more we accommodate the wildlife we have displaced, the less we are likely to clash with it.

In addition to creating a space supportive of native species, the Canadian Wildlife Federation also promotes participation in citizen or community science. [Project FeederWatch](#) is a November to April survey of birds that visit backyards, nature centres, community areas, and other locales in North America. The project is operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada and collects [critical information](#) which aids in the study of birds and biodiversity around the world.

Enthusiastic community scientists are also encouraged to report their sighting on [iNaturalist](#), which was just recently given the prestigious Heinz Award for the Environment for the critical role they have played in conservation efforts worldwide. Residents of Newmarket have reported more than [150 species of bird](#) just within the borders of the Town. Sighting within backyards range from the usual urban sightings of mourning doves and goldfinches to typical feeder birds like blue jays and black-capped chickadees; from the ones you have to work for like downy woodpeckers, ruby-throated hummingbirds, and Baltimore orioles, to the ones you would never expect to see in a suburban backyard such as hermit thrush, northern flickers, and red-eyed vireo.

It is well known that being near to nature and spending time immersed in it is good for your overall health. Nature Canada recently published [an article](#) about a study which found that watching birds near your home specifically is highly beneficial to your mental health. According to research from the University of Exeter, the British Trust for Ornithology, and the University of Queensland, those living in neighbourhoods with more birds are less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress. Many people today, children in particular, have a worrying disconnection from nature. So much so that the term [Nature-Deficit Disorder](#) has been coined by medical professionals. For many children the only place they might experience nature is in their own backyard.

Perhaps you're familiar with the Vinyl Cafe story [The Bird](#) by Stuart McLean. At the height of the pandemic, in the winter of 2020/2021, a resident of Newmarket lived this story in reality. A female summer tanager, who should have been far away in Brazil, found sanctuary in a local yard because of the environment created there. Birders drove for hours to arrive at dawn for the privilege of standing in the cold at the side of their house to see that little bird with their own eyes. Birding has always been a popular hobby, though somewhat niche, however during the lockdowns, when people had no choice but to stay at home, they [learned](#) that it was possible to connect with nature right in their own backyards and reap the many benefits of watching birds.

I agree that bird feeding must be done in a responsible manner, however, the suggestions made by that presenter are not those of a knowledgeable backyard birder. Responsible birders keep our feeders clean to prevent the spread of illness, we take the feeders in when we see signs of avian pox or finch eye disease, we use heaters to keep a source of fresh water available all winter, and most people who maintain a feeding station go to great lengths to deter other animals such as squirrels and raccoons. We use baffles, squirrel proof feeders, and even bird seed coated with chilli pepper. Seed is expensive. Most people are trying to avoid feeding the four legged ones.

People by no means are required to naturalize their yard, though we are strongly encouraged to do so by agencies like [Ontario Nature](#). Some may prefer, or only be able to afford, one feeder. But those of us with the desire and means to draw diversity, must provide diversity. This means different types of feeders for different types of bird or food. Only finches can eat from finch feeders. Safflower attracts many species, but is inedible by nuisance birds like starlings and rock pigeons. Suet feeders are key to attracting woodpeckers. Nectar feeders are the only way to bring hummingbirds and orioles. Open trays are necessary for doves and cardinals. In order to survive Canadian winters blue jays cache their food and they love peanuts.

Birds are not a nuisance. They are a beautiful and essential part of a thriving ecosystem. And like all other non-human animals, they do not understand fences, borders, or boundaries. The moment we step outside of our homes we are in a space that we share with all wildlife. Cities across the country are working to be certified as [Bird Friendly Cities](#). Newmarket has not yet earned this title, but with our record of preserving our green space and natural heritage, passing bylaws to protect private trees, adding to our canopy every year, and other wonderful initiatives, this is a honour we could earn!

Rather than restricting residents' ability to attract and interact with nature, the town would be better served by educating the public on responsible bird feeding. Staff could be trained to more effectively recognize the difference between a knowledgeable and responsible birder and someone who is not taking the necessary steps to deter disease, nuisance birds, and pests.

The current approach is a disproportionate response to an incredibly small percentage of residents making overly dramatic complaints, rather than the educated and thoughtful response I have come to expect from this Council.

Limiting residents to a mere six feeders drastically reduces the diversity they are able to support in their

own little ecosystem. For all the reasons I have provided, I would urge Council not to take the regressive action of restricting people's ability to feed the birds.

Most sincerely,

Emily Bonia-Coffey