Background

Birds are useful indicators of ecological change because they are highly mobile and generally conspicuous. As climate in a particular place changes, suitability may worsen for some species and improve for others. These changes in climate may create the potential for local extirpation or new colonization. This brief summarizes projected changes in climate suitability by mid-century for birds at Wright Brothers National Memorial (hereafter, the Memorial) under two climate change scenarios (see Wu et al. 2018 for full results, and Langham et al. 2015 for more information regarding how climate suitability is characterized). The high-emissions pathway (RCP8.5) represents a future in which little action is taken to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases. The low-emissions pathway (RCP2.6) is a best-case scenario of aggressive efforts to reduce emissions. These emissions pathways are globally standardized and established by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for projecting future climate change. The findings below are model-based projections of how species distributions may change in response to climate change. A 10-km buffer was applied to each park to match the spatial resolution of the species distribution models (10 x 10 km), and climate suitability was taken as the average of all cells encompassed by the park and buffer.

Results

Climate change is expected to alter the bird community at the Memorial, with greater impacts under the high-emissions pathway than under the low-emissions pathway (Figure 1). Among the species likely to be found at the Memorial today, climate suitability in summer under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 16 (e.g., Figure 2), remain stable for 16, and worsen for 16 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 16 species in summer, potentially resulting in extirpation of those species from the Memorial. Climate is projected to become suitable in summer for 24 species not found at the Memorial today, potentially resulting in local colonization. Climate suitability in winter under the high-emissions pathway is projected to improve for 33, remain stable for 31, and worsen for 28 species. Suitable climate ceases to occur for 9 species in winter, potentially resulting in extirpation from the Memorial. Climate is projected to become suitable in winter for 56 species not found at the Memorial today, potentially resulting in local colonization.
Results (continued)

Potential Turnover Index
Potential bird species turnover for the Memorial between the present and 2050 is 0.24 in summer (39th percentile across all national parks) and 0.19 in winter (24th percentile) under the high-emissions pathway. Potential species turnover declines to 0.14 in summer and 0.15 in winter under the low-emissions pathway. Turnover index was calculated based on the theoretical proportions of potential extirpations and potential colonizations by 2050 relative to today (as reported in Wu et al. 2018), and therefore assumes that all potential extirpations and colonizations are realized. According to this index, no change would be represented as 0, whereas a complete change in the bird community would be represented as 1.

Climate Sensitive Species
The Memorial is or may become home to 27 species that are highly sensitive to climate change across their range (i.e., they are projected to lose climate suitability in over 50% of their current range in North America in summer and/or winter by 2050; Table 1; Langham et al. 2015). While the Memorial may serve as an important refuge for 23 of these climate-sensitive species, 4 might be extirpated from the Memorial in at least one season by 2050.

![Figure 2. Climate at the Memorial in summer is projected to remain suitable for the Red-winged Blackbird (Agelaius phoeniceus) through 2050. Photo by Andy Reago & Chrissy McClarin/Flickr (CC BY 2.0).](image)

Management Implications
Parks differ in potential colonization and extirpation rates, and therefore different climate change adaptation strategies may apply. Under the high-emissions pathway, Wright Brothers National Memorial falls within the intermediate change group. Parks anticipating intermediate change can best support landscape-scale bird conservation by emphasizing habitat restoration, maintaining natural disturbance regimes, and reducing other stressors. Furthermore, park managers have an opportunity to focus on supporting the 23 species that are highly sensitive to climate change across their range (Table 1; Langham et al. 2015) but for which the park is a potential refuge. Monitoring to identify changes in bird communities will inform the selection of appropriate management responses.

Caveats
The species distribution models included in this study are based solely on climate variables (i.e., a combination of annual and seasonal measures of temperature and precipitation), which means there are limits on their interpretation. Significant changes in climate suitability, as measured here, will not always result in a species response, and all projections should be interpreted as potential trends. Multiple other factors mediate responses to climate change, including habitat availability, ecological processes that affect demography, biotic interactions that inhibit and facilitate species’ colonization or extirpation, dispersal capacity, species’ evolutionary adaptive capacity, and phenotypic plasticity (e.g., behavioral adjustments). Ultimately, models can tell us where to focus our concern and which species are most likely to be affected, but monitoring is the only way to validate these projections and should inform any on-the-ground conservation action.
More Information

For more information, including details on the methods, please see the scientific publication (Wu et al. 2018) and the project overview brief, and visit the NPS Climate Change Response Program website.

References


Wu et al. (2018) Projected avifaunal responses to climate change across the U.S. National Park System. PLOS ONE.

Contacts

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Species Projections

Table 1. Climate suitability projections by 2050 under the high-emissions pathway for all birds currently present at the Memorial based on both NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program data and eBird observation data, plus those species for which climate at the Memorial is projected to become suitable in the future. "Potential colonization" indicates that climate is projected to become suitable for the species, whereas "potential extirpation" indicates that climate is suitable today but projected to become unsuitable. Omitted species were either not modeled due to data deficiency or were absent from the I&M and eBird datasets. Observations of late-season migrants may result in these species appearing as present in the park when they may only migrate through. Species are ordered according to taxonomic groups, denoted by alternating background shading.

* Species in top and bottom 10th percentile of absolute change

^ Species that are highly climate sensitive

- Species not found or found only occasionally, and not projected to colonize by 2050

x Species not modeled in this season

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