

# Some Coffee is for the Birds

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Historically, the demand for coffee encouraged coffee agribusinesses to clear-cut vast tracts of tropical rainforest and plant monoculture coffee plantations with applied pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers to boost production. For the past thirty years conservationists have been pointing out how this emphasis on high production has had horrendous consequences for birds.

As an alternative, it has been advocated that the approach taken by traditional coffee farmers in the neotropics, which is to cultivate coffee bushes in the protective shade of the rainforest canopy, helps to nurture a whole host of bird species. Additionally, the coffee bushes draw nutrients from organically renewed rainforest soil, and gain pest and weed protection from surrounding flora and fauna.

Species surveys conducted by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) indicate that birds are found in significantly greater abundance and diversity within shaded coffee farms than in full-sun coffee plantations. Additionally, traditional growing methods that provide diverse mixes of natural and planted flora foster the greatest diversity of birds.



Black-throated Gray Warbler  
(c) Bill Schmoker



Townsend's Warbler (c) Bill Schmoker



Ovenbird (c) Rob Raker



Black-headed Grosbeak (c) Mick Thompson

In 1999 the SMBC determined that even though some coffees may be labeled as “organic,” “free trade”, or even “shade-grown,” that these designations do not necessarily signify that the coffee is really being grown in a way that provides for birds. At that time, the SMBC originated the Bird Friendly® Coffee Certification, which is now the gold standard for coffee farm habitat conservation. It has the strictest requirements of any coffee certification for measures such as shade-tree height, shade density, and plant biodiversity.

Aside from SMBC certification, consumers have no guarantees that coffee labeled with other certifications, such as organic or shade grown, is bird friendly. Yet consumers can improve the chances that critical habitat has not been destroyed or diminished by avoiding store-

bought and fast-food coffees and choosing Arabica over Robusta varieties. Also, if you already have a coffee company that is your favorite, encourage them to seek Bird-Friendly certification so that you can continue to give them your business.

Informed decision-making about coffee is one important way in which our everyday actions can support healthy bird populations in critically important ways.

**Learn More:**

For more info on Bird-Friendly coffee:  
<https://nationalzoo.si.edu/migratory-birds/bird-friendly-coffee>

To learn where you can buy Bird-Friendly coffee: <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/migratory-birds/where-buy-bird-friendly-coffee>

For an explanation of different coffee certifications:  
<http://www.coffeehabitat.com/certification-guide/>

