

Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee

Testimony from Aaron Heinsman of Baltimore City, re: **HB236
Maryland Sustainable Buildings Act of 2021**

March 31, 2021

I offer this testimony in support of proposed HB236.

I will not attempt to paraphrase expert testimony from scientists, conservations, and architects as to the real and tangible benefits of this bill through energy reduction and mitigation of wildlife casualties. Others are providing that vital context in support of this bill.

Instead I am writing as an active volunteer with Lights Out Baltimore, an official program of the Baltimore Bird Club, a chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society. I first became aware of the scale of the problem of bird injuries and deaths from window collisions in early 2014, when I was exposed to the Baker Artist Award-winning photography of Lynne Parks at an exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Seeing her sensitive portraits of birds who had perished after colliding with windows of office buildings, street-level retail, and our convention center in downtown Baltimore moved me profoundly, spurring me to discuss the Lights Out Baltimore program with its coordinator (and my former colleague), Lindsay Jacks. She explained the goals of the program: to make Baltimore and beyond safe for migratory birds during spring and fall migration by turning out decorative and non-essential lighting daily between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. and to advocate for bird-safe design in both current and new buildings.

I joined her for my first volunteer shift soon after, and I still vividly recall discovering the first casualty on the Saturday morning in March 2014: a yellow-billed cuckoo on its back with wings splayed open, which had died after striking a west-facing window of the Baltimore Convention Center.

Since that day, I have been galvanized by this issue, and have in my seven years as a volunteer thus far personally found nearly 1,500 injured or dead birds on my six-mile route through Mount Vernon, Downtown, and the Inner Harbor of Baltimore. Last fall during migration season, I found nearly 300 alone. I enclose a recent feature article from The Baltimore Sun spotlighting our work for your reference.

I respectfully ask the members of the committee to approve this bill and support it in a subsequent floor vote.

Sincerely,

Aaron Heinsman

BALTIMORE CITY MARYLAND

A consequence of the coronavirus pandemic for these Baltimore activists? Freezers full of dead birds.

By CHRISTINE CONDON
BALTIMORE SUN | NOV 17, 2020



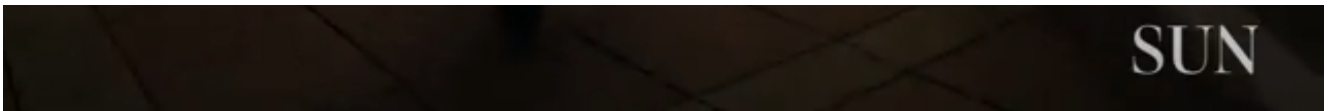
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Lights Out Baltimore volunteers collect dead and injured birds in an effort to monitor how many birds die after striking windows during migration season.



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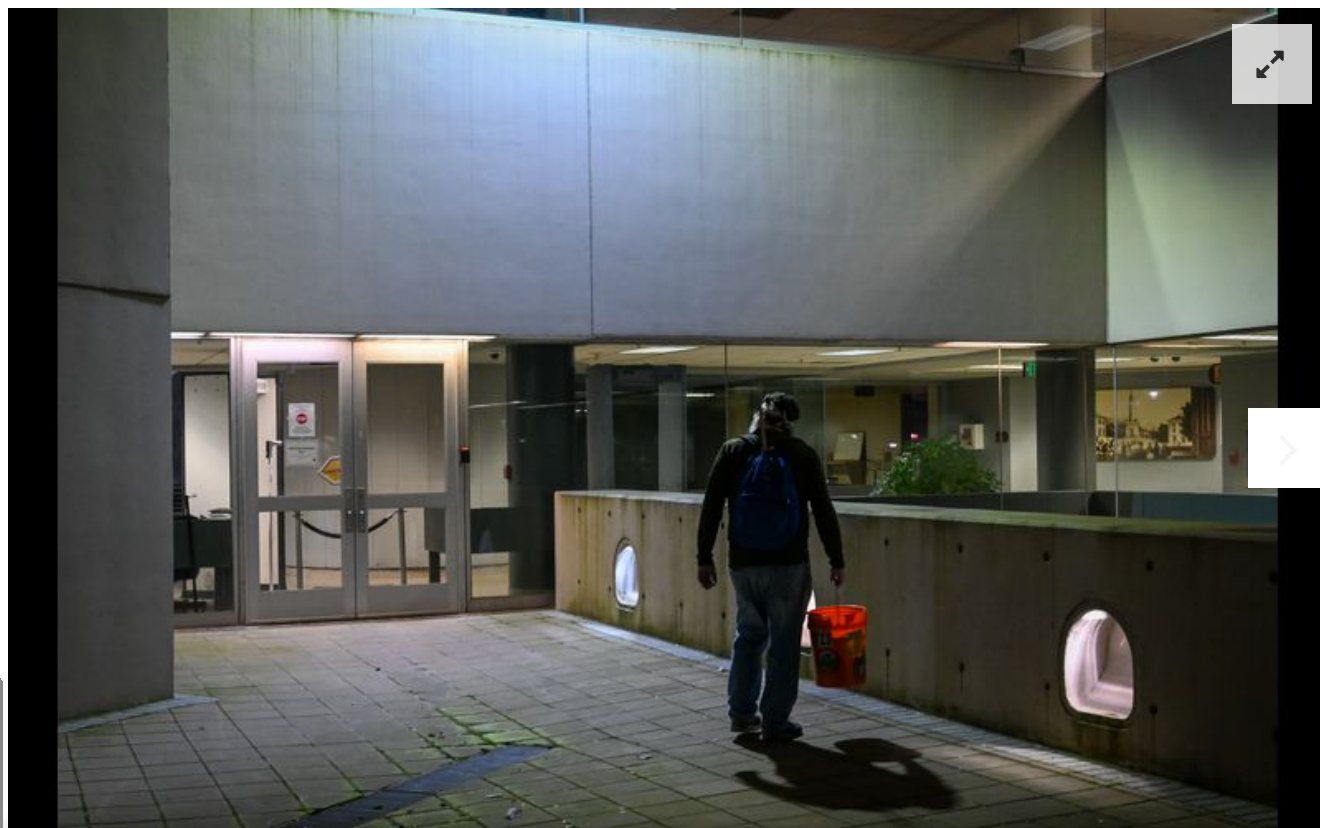
The Ziploc bags are tucked into a shoebox in Aaron Heinsman's freezer, near pouches of frozen vegetables and a cauliflower pizza crust.

Inside are birds. Hundreds of them. Common yellowthroats and American woodcocks and ovenbirds, avian ice cubes tightly sealed in plastic.

Each met a devastating end in Baltimore City during this year's migration season, at the hands of glass buildings they didn't see coming. The birds are collected by [Lights Out Baltimore — a group that advocates for making buildings “bird-safe,”](#) and collects data on bird collisions along the way.

And frozen those carcasses will remain — at least for the time being. Normally, the frosty songbirds would be bound for a museum collection or a laboratory. But because of the coronavirus pandemic, Heinsman and the group's other bird-gathering volunteers have nowhere to take them.

“This is sort of uncharted territory for us,” Heinsman said.



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Lights Out Baltimore volunteer Aaron Heinsman walks along the outside of the Federal Courthouse in search of dead or injured birds that have struck the windows overnight. (Jerry Jackson/Baltimore Sun)

Washington's Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, where Baltimore's birds usually land, is closed to donations. Plenty of scientific research that might make use of them remains on hold.

And so, for Lights Out volunteers, there is yet another strange coronavirus complication: birds in freezers. And lots of them.

"When people come over to my house: 'Oh, do you need some ice for your drink? I'll get that for you,'" said Lynne Parks, one of the group's volunteers, who also stores fallen birds at home.

Heinsman added: "Explaining the dead birds has been interesting to friends, potential romantic partners and cat sitters."

The pandemic struck before Lindsay Jacks, the group's director, could donate the 2019 haul, some 500 birds. And so they, too, fill a large standalone freezer in her basement, awaiting a return to relative normalcy alongside their human collectors. Soon, Jacks will buy a new freezer, the temporary resting place for another several hundred birds that died this year on city streets.

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Practically every day during migration season, Lights Out volunteers scour downtown Baltimore beginning around 5 a.m., and circle the perimeters of skyscrapers in search of dead and injured birds. The dead are Ziplocked and placed into a waiting bucket, and the wounded are swept into paper bags, which are binder-clipped to the bucket's lip. At the walk's conclusion, the dazed songbirds — and sometimes bats — are brought to the Phoenix Nature Center in Baltimore County for rehabilitation.

question. They keep the birds to ensure they won't have died in vain, and in the hopes that they'll contribute meaningfully to research by eventually adding to the Smithsonian's collection.

In May, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine researchers published a study they conducted using bird specimens from Lights Out.

Birds use up lots of oxygen when they fly, and despite the stress this exerts, they live remarkably long lives. Through their study, researchers discovered that a gene mutation — a deletion scientists haven't observed in other vertebrate animals — helps them do so, said researcher Gianni M. Castiglione, who worked alongside Hopkins ophthalmology professor Elia J. Duh.

Most of the project's research took place before COVID-19 halted laboratory work, Castiglione said.

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The genome research could shed light on how to slow human aging using antioxidants. It also could help with the development of drugs to treat cancer and certain diseases of the eye. For cancer, it's ideal to flip off the body's antioxidant response; for certain ocular diseases, it's ideal to kick it into overdrive.

For one month during three different migration seasons, Castiglione woke up around 4 a.m. to await word from Lights Out volunteers on their morning walks. Often, the injured birds they brought had lain outside for too long, and some tissue samples that Castiglione needed from their livers, lungs, hearts and skin weren't viable. But most of the time, the birds could be used somehow to further the research.

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“I think I could have probably found another way, through bird rescues or something like that, where they have deceased birds. But I don't know if I'd be able to get them as quickly. They might have been frozen carcasses.” Castiglione said

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of course, I don't think I would have been able to do the same rigor of research if it wasn't for Lights Out Baltimore. I think I can say that unequivocally."

At the end of the migration season, when Lights Out's dead birds are typically dropped off at the Museum of Natural History an hour's drive down Interstate 95, they are carefully logged and entered into the museum's collection. Then, under normal circumstances, they're available for researchers to borrow and examine.

"It's hard because we can't go in and check the collection, protect the collection or add to the collection," said Christina Gebhard, a museum specialist in the division of birds. "Above all else, we cannot contribute to science."

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Researchers have been doing their best to organize and catalog photos of the collection from home, but they're itching to return to the museum.

Officials say no such return is in sight.

"The Smithsonian is reopening its facilities to the public and essential staff where and when it can safely," wrote spokesman Ryan Lavery in a statement. "I hope the lack of clarity on a projected timeline is understandable given the uncertainty around the coronavirus."

So far, there are 165 birds from Lights Out Baltimore in the collection, and some of those are likely to feature in a Natural History Museum exhibition tentatively planned for fall 2022.

Called "Dark Skies," the exhibit will focus on the "global issue of how man-made light is influencing nature and our relationship with the night sky," Lavery said.

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The birds haven't just contributed to scientific research, but to a changing landscape in downtown Baltimore. Thanks in part to Lights Out's recordkeeping, a few of the city's worst offenders when it comes to bird collisions have taken steps to become "bird-safe."

Perhaps most notably, the National Aquarium covered a glass wall surrounding its Australia exhibit in a dotted film a few years back, so that birds could detect it. On the film, a collection of dense and sparse dots spell out "National Aquarium" vertically along the building's edge.

"That's what's kind of so amazing about it is, it's doing, you know, this really great work, and it just looks like it was meant to be there," said Jacqueline Bershada, the aquarium's vice president of planning and design.

The aquarium plans to redo the glass on its rainforest exhibit in a few years, and it will use frosted glass instead this time, Bershada said, so that the pane is visible to birds.

There are also plans to rid the aquarium's courtyard of lighting that shines upward, since such fixtures can confuse migrating birds.

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It's a constant battle, and a uniquely morbid hobby, but volunteers say it's rewarding, too.

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“One out of four is a rescue, and that one out of four can really keep you going,” Jacks said. “You started your day at 5:30 in the morning and you rescued a bird. How many people can say that?”

An injured Silver-haired bat found along Pratt Street reacts as Lights Out Baltimore volunteer Aaron Heinsman tries to scoop it into a bag to be taken to Phoenix Wildlife Center. (Jerry Jackson/Baltimore Sun)

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On a recent walk, Heinsman discovered his one out of four — a fallen silver-haired bat, huddled in a ball beside a stoop on Pratt Street. Though the bat may have looked dead to the average passerby — it was in fact very alive, and when prodded,

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Quickly, it was brushed into a lunch bag and toted around the city, before a volunteer came by to haul it to Phoenix.

When bats collide with buildings and fall to the ground, a major worry is that they will become dehydrated. But bats also can have a rather difficult time taking flight from land.

But this bat was one of the lucky ones.

About a day after it arrived at the nature center, it was released back into the wild.

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As Heinsman said of his first rescue: “It’s magical.”

Christine Condon



Christine Condon is a breaking news and environment reporter for The Baltimore Sun. Christine is a recent graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park. She's also worked as a reporting intern for McClatchy's Washington D.C. Bureau and Baltimore's The Daily Record.

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