



# Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo: Migratory Birds and the Impending Ecological Catastrophe

*Michael McCarthy*

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The return of migrant birds from their wintering grounds in the tropics is one of the delights of America's spring, as anyone will testify whose heart has leapt in April or May at the first liquid song of the woodthrush, or the first black-and-orange flash of the Baltimore oriole. But in recent years concern has grown that migrant birds may be declining, perhaps because of deforestation at their winter quarters in the Caribbean and in Central and South America.

Now comes the first evidence that such declines are indeed happening to migrant birds. They pour into the Northern Hemisphere each year in a multi-colored, singing cascade: cuckoos, swallows, martins, swifts, turtle doves, warblers, wagtails, wheatears, chats, nightingales, nightjars, thrushes, pipits, and flycatchers. The vanishing of these Old World birds would be not just an environmental loss but a cultural disaster of enormous magnitude, as many of these species have resonated through literature, legends, and folklore for thousands of years. The turtle dove's arrival is announced in the Bible's Song of Solomon; the nightingale sings from Latin poetry to John Keats to a 1940s hit in London's Berkeley Square; the European cuckoo, with its double note that is a perfect musical interval—a minor third—is the source of proverbs in every country of the continent.

In *Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo*, Michael McCarthy highlights for the first time the disappearance of these birds which, he points out, are a part of Europe's distinctive cultural furniture, "as much as cathedrals, Latin, olive oil, or wine." He shows how their loss would do devastating damage to the cultural inheritance of us all. With 13 woodcuts.

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