



A BIRD IN THE HAND

Is a Conservation Win

BY KELLY BALL

HOLLY GREENBERG

Nearly 11,000 crowd-sourced, handmade bird replicas will eventually compose the traveling art installation *Bird Collisions in the Anthropocene*.

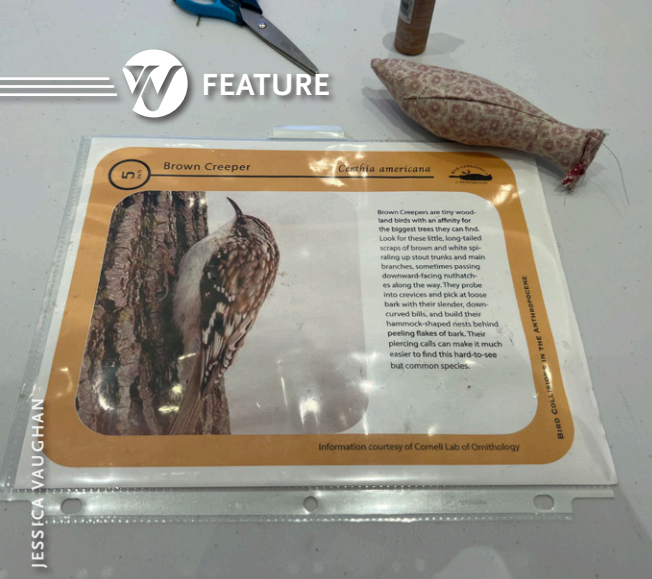
“It’s such an easy project because everyone loves birds,” Holly Greenberg said to me during our Zoom call. She held up what appeared to be a tiny, bird-shaped pillow. But this was no pillow. Eventually it will become one of the 10,836 bird replicas composing a traveling installation piece. Its primary function: raising awareness about bird collisions.

As a lakeshore metropolis along the Mississippi Flyway, Chicago’s bright lights and glassy buildings make it one of the most dangerous stretches for nocturnal migratory birds to navigate successfully. An unfortunate convergence of conditions on the night of October 5, 2023—a shift in wind conditions following a stretch of unfavorable weather; a storm just south of Chicago; and bright lights shining from inside McCormick Place, a 2.6 million square-foot convention center along Lake Michigan—caused confusion for low-flying migrants. The migrants had a

tailwind for efficient southbound flight while the looming storm kept the birds lower than normal. The lights from inside the convention center’s floor-to-ceiling windows confused the low-flying birds, resulting in nearly 1,000 casualties.

After volunteer bird monitors posted photos of the hundreds of specimens collected outside the convention center the next day, the shocking event quickly went viral. As major news outlets picked up the story, it circulated far and wide. One of the people who read about the event in its immediate aftermath was Greenberg. She resolved to do something about it immediately. “I knew I had to act,” she said.

So she founded Bird Collisions in the Anthropocene, a conservation and community art project. In workshops, participants handcraft bird replicas using upcycled fabric. Each replica stands in for one of the 10,836 birds collected following window collisions in Chicago during 2023.



WHEN ART AND CONSERVATION INTERSECT

Greenberg considers her project primarily as a way to educate the public. She understands firsthand how critical that piece is. “Education is the foundation to help people change.” Just a few years ago, I didn’t know that migratory birds were crashing into windows at these astonishing rates, either.”

Crowdsourcing a massive art project is also new territory for Greenberg. By training, she is a studio artist with a background in printmaking and painting large, multi-process print work and installations. Recently retired, for several years she was an art professor at Syracuse University. In 2022, during a research sabbatical to learn about sustainable arts practices in Evanston, Illinois, Greenberg began volunteering to remove European buckthorn around the city and replace it with native plants. Another volunteer remarked how the species they planted would benefit birds, but that the plants could not prevent birds from crashing into windows in the greater Chicago area’s many buildings.

This completely shocked Greenberg. To understand the problem, she dedicated herself to learning more about window collisions. Greenberg joined Chicago Bird Collision Monitors (CBCM) volunteers on one of their routine walks to search the city for dead and injured birds. During a tour of Northwestern University, she was shown a freezer filled with bags of dead birds, victims of Chicago-area window collisions.

Her crash course in window collisions was not entirely focused on its devastating impact on birds. Greenberg also learned about a variety of simple, actionable solutions to deter birds from hitting windows. By simply adding visual markers on a window’s exterior surface, spaced in a deliberate pattern, windows could be made far less deadly to birds in flight.

One option involves placing tape or film with dots spaced 2 inches by 2 inches apart, which prevents the reflectivity and see-through effects that confuse and kill birds. Another remedy is hanging twine or rope every four inches from the window’s top to bottom. One of the easiest solutions is using an oil stick marker or paint pen on a window exterior to mimic the dotted film pattern.

The simplicity of the remedies was simultaneously inspirational and deflating. “We can save birds with these really simple remediations, but nearly nobody is aware they are available,” she said.

Fast-forward to nearly a year later, when Greenberg first read about the mass casualty event at McCormick Place and soon after, Bird Collisions in the Anthropocene

was born. She envisioned handcrafted individual replicas of every bird that died in Chicago window collisions throughout 2023, creating a sort of “red carpet” of dead birds. This piece could then be publicly displayed as an educational tool to teach the public about the problem and its solution.

Knowing it would be an enormous task for her to tackle in isolation, Greenberg had an epiphany. “I thought, ‘I KNOW! I’ll have people help me and crowdsource the making of these birds. This could serve two purposes: accelerate the end result AND get the message out.’” Her idea was to conduct workshops, discussing bird collisions and remediation solutions as participants created bird replicas.

First, Greenberg needed the dataset from Chicago’s 2023 bird collision specimens. She met with Dave Willard and members of Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History, where CBCM delivers dead birds for the museum’s ornithology department to preserve and study. After she explained her idea, “They did look at me initially and remark, ‘You’re gonna do *what*?! How are you gonna make these bird replicas??!’ When I described my workshop idea, Dave responded, ‘You’re gonna have *random* people do it?!’”

In January 2024, Greenberg received the 2023 data set. Based on preliminary conversations with

Willard, she had estimated needing to depict about 7,000–8,000 total birds. The final tally of nearly 11,000 greatly exceeded her estimate, and represented more than 250 species. Undeterred, Greenberg, with help from graduate student associates, immediately began implementing plans. She registered Birding in the Anthropocene as a non-profit organization. By March, workshops began.

CRAFTING IS FOR THE BIRDS

The task for workshop participants is simple. Each person receives a sheet with a side view, breast view, and hind view of their designated bird species. Choosing from bins of different colored fabrics, participants then use glue and scissors to make their bird. As a sustainable artist, Greenberg prioritizes the project’s light footprint. She advertises on “Buy Nothing” Facebook groups for fabric scraps; the bird stuffing is from discarded pillows; and all bird forms are sewn from old bedsheets. She emphatically stated, “I don’t want to encourage any new product manufacturing.”

Once completed, every bird is assigned an official tag, like the ones used for museum specimens. Ultimately, all replica birds will be sewn onto a 300-foot-long red carpet, according to the date they died. A searchable database will allow



Top: This bird base is about to become a brown creeper. **Middle:** Education is a key part of Greenberg’s bird-crafting workshops. **Bottom:** Each bird replica is assigned an official tag, as is done for actual museum specimens.



anyone who created a replica bird for the project to locate it on the installation.

How do participants respond to crafting a bird replica when they have little or no real experience with handi-crafting? “Most adults have not completed a craft project since they were in elementary school. So, looking at the bird photos, and the fabric, scissors, and glue, there can be some initial hesitation,” she said. Greenberg gives basic directions and then launches into her presentation. “After about 15 minutes, most participants are entirely in the zone.” The participants become a de facto community.

Greenberg shared a few memorable moments from the workshops she’s conducted to date. “At one event, held at a big outdoor patio, two women had finished their birds. I complimented them on a job well done, and one woman responded, ‘Yes... and I also made a friend.’ They seemed to get along so well, I had just assumed they had attended together!”

Another sweet memory involved young campers at the Lincoln Park Zoo. “One of their camp activities was to participate in my workshop. As it got darker outside, they brought out their headlamps so they could better see as they finished their birds. One little boy brought his bird to me, and I tagged it. Then his mom said, ‘He wants to make five birds, because he is five years old.’ And so he did, while his mom sat by him.” Participants are welcome to make as many birds as they want.

Another standout memory Greenberg shared shows the significance of window remediation. She explained, “I begin every workshop with this question: ‘How many people have heard a bird hit their window?’ and at least half the attendees raise their hands. But at one workshop, a woman with a raised hand said, ‘Yeah, but I put up the dots.’” Greenberg was so surprised she paused; encountering people who not only know about but have remediated their windows is rare. Greenberg continued, “So I asked her, ‘How do you like the dots?’ and she said, ‘I don’t even notice them. I love my dots. I love them because I never hear a bird hit my window anymore. I love that I’m not killing birds.’ It was a powerful testimonial, so much so that Greenberg now shares it at all of her workshops.

About those dots: following the mass collision incident and ensuing public pressure, in 2024, McCormick Place’s leadership implemented solutions. Now all building blinds are closed at

sunset, and nonessential exterior lighting is shut off. Most impressively, in cooperation with US Fish and Wildlife Service experts, nearly 120,000 square feet of windows were treated with Feather Friendly-brand dot-patterned film. The data to date is promising. The number of collisions has dropped; in 2024, about 50 birds were collected compared with more than 2,000 in 2023.

Generally, the response at workshops to window remediation is positive. Greenberg encourages participants to share more about the window strikes they hear. “For most households, it’s almost always the same window, and nearly everyone is willing to treat the window.” She provides free Feather Friendly film (a partner in Greenberg’s project, the company donates the material) to participants pledging to modify their windows. Even if there’s a reluctance and participants decline, Holly still considers it a win. “If there’s at least a seed of awareness planted, that is what matters.”

If the current rate of bird replica creation continues, Greenberg is hopeful that the project will be completed by 2028. Also augmenting this effort is Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology, where Greenberg has already led several workshops. “Now I’m working with their education department on a kit for biology teachers in the state as a supplement for the state’s bird collision lab requirement in biology courses.” Part of a pilot program, the curriculum includes a window remediation component. Students will be encouraged to identify a problematic window at their school or within the community, collect data, and provide a remedy.

HOW TO HELP

Interested in becoming involved in this community-driven project? There are several ways to do so:

Attend a workshop (listed on her website and regularly updated). Join Greenberg for a free bird workshop, where you can expect to spend 20–40 minutes crafting a bird with all supplies provided.

Host your own bird-making workshop. Bring people together at your home, school, or community group and spread awareness about bird/building collisions and the steps we can take to help protect birds.

Sew bird bodies. A stuffed bird base is required for each of the more than 10,000 bird replicas in this project. Whether you’re a novice or an ace sewer—don’t worry, because the bases eventually will be decorated.

Learn more about the project and how to get involved at hollygreenberg.com/bird-collisions-anthropocene.



Become involved!

VISIT: hollygreenberg.com/bulk-birdmaking
EMAIL: birdcollisionsproject@gmail.com

An Ohio native, Kelly Ball is a freelance writer who has been based in Cape May, New Jersey, since 2022. She is especially passionate about telling in situ conservation stories.



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Top: Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History houses the stunning toll of nearly 1,000 bird collisions on one building on the night of October 5, 2023. **Bottom:** Artist Holly Greenberg with a portion of her red carpet of handmade windowkills.