



Are your beans for the birds? Cheap coffee destroys bird habitat

The majority of the bird species that breed in North America spend more time in the tropics in the winter than they do here in the breeding season. They must find good quality habitat during the winter months in order to survive to migrate and nest once again.

Most people are aware that deforestation is a big problem in Latin America, and much of it is due to agriculture. Coffee is one of the world's major crops, covering tens of millions of acres, all in tropical countries. Coffee is an understory shrub that naturally grows under the shade of other trees. These shade coffee farms provide very good habitat for birds and other biodiversity, often very similar to natural forests.



However, new types of coffee have been developed that can be grown in higher densities without the protection of shade. There is huge pressure for farmers to convert to this higher yield "sun coffee." This not only results in forests being cleared for intensive coffee growing, but these varieties require high levels of fertilizer, pesticide application, and deplete tropical soils. Tens of thousands of acres of forest in Latin America have already been cleared for growing inexpensive, low quality "sun coffee."

You *can* make a difference. Americans drink one-third of the world's coffee, and it is the second largest U.S. import after oil. ***If you are buying inexpensive, grocery-store coffee you are contributing to the destruction of bird habitat and the decline of migratory songbirds.*** Learn more about the birds and coffee connection!

How to choose eco-friendly coffee

Because of the lack of standardization in coffee labeling, finding truly eco-friendly coffee isn't always easy. Here are some things to look for.

Country of origin. These countries are more likely to grow shade coffee: *Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Bolivia, and Ethiopia.*

These nations are more likely to grow sun coffee, and unless they are Smithsonian Bird-Friendly certified, it's probably best to avoid them: *Costa Rica, Brazil, and Colombia.*

Certification. Various organizations "certify" that coffee is grown or purchased under particular conditions (although the majority of small farmers cannot afford the costs involved in certifying their crops). This is espe-

cially important regarding environmental conditions, because there is no legal definition of "shade grown." Certifications are useful if you don't have the time to research where and how your coffee was grown. There is more information about the various certifications on the next page.

Buy coffee from a **small, specialty roaster.** A good roaster develops a relationship with the farms and co-ops that grow their coffee -- it's in everybody's best interest for the coffee to be grown sustainably. Large corporations selling grocery store coffee are interested in profit, which means high volume and low prices. There are some recommended roasters on the next page.

Price. One thing is certain: Cheap coffee is not sustainable. Not for the farmer and not for the environment. If you are paying less than around \$8 a pound for coffee, you are contributing to the destruction of habitat. It's one of the worst things you can do for the environment on a daily basis...and one of the easiest things for you to change.



Birds that use shade coffee

Here are some of “our” birds that are commonly found in the winter on shade coffee farms, and the regions where they typically winter.

- **West Indies (Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico)** Black-throated Blue Warbler, Prairie Warbler, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Bicknell’s Thrush.
- **Mexico and northern Central America.** Swainson’s Thrush, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Wood Thrush.
- **Southern Central America and South America.** Cerulean Warbler, Golden-winged Warbler, Wilson’s Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Summer Tanager.



What do all the certification seals mean?

Many coffees are labeled “Shade Grown,” but there is no legal definition for this term and it is open to wide interpretation. Here are some of the common certifications you may find on coffee.

Smithsonian “Bird-Friendly.” The most stringent environmental standards of any certification system, also required to be certified organic.

If you see this seal, it is one of the best assurances that the coffee was grown with birds and biodiversity as top priorities.



“Bird-Friendly” is trademarked by Smithsonian. *Make sure you see the logo on the left* or it isn’t genuine Bird-Friendly coffee.

Rainforest Alliance.

Less rigorous standards, not required to be organic. Look for coffee that says it is *100% Rainforest Alliance certified*, because a coffee is permitted to carry the seal and only contain 30% certified beans.



Organic. Many (but not necessarily all) chemical inputs have been elimi-

nated or reduced. Generally, coffee that is organic is grown under at least some shade cover.

Fair Trade. Indicates growers were paid a minimum price. This certification has few environmental criteria, and none for shade or biodiversity. This certification is available only to co-ops, not estates or individual farms.

Learn more

- **Coffee & Conservation** (www.coffeehabitat.com). An entire web site devoted to sustainably-grown coffee, with an emphasis on birds and biodiversity.
- **Why Migratory Birds are Crazy for Coffee** (<http://dwarfurl.com/8ac3b>). A fact sheet from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center.
- **Made in the Shade** (<http://tinyurl.com/d5cu7j>). Audubon Magazine article on shade coffee.
- **The Case of the Disappearing Warbler** (<http://dwarfurl.com/8d36b>). National Wildlife article on the importance of wintering habitat, and shade coffee, to the health of migratory bird populations.

Recommended coffee sources

Birds and Beans – www.birdsandbeans.com/

Caribou Coffee – look for coffee with a Rainforest Alliance seal.

Whole Foods – Their subsidiary Allegro Coffee Roasters sources coffee from many shade farms, including Nicaragua’s Selva Negra and El Jaguar.

Counter Culture Coffee – www.counterculturecoffee.com/. Offers a number of shade coffees, including Finca Nueva Armenia and Café San Ramon.

Caffe Ibis – www.caffeibis.com

Produced by the Rouge River Bird Observatory, University of Michigan-Dearborn. www.rrbo.org