

“The Burnham Plan put it out there, all that green space. But Chicago is also the birthplace of the skyscraper. So what we gave, we take away.”

— Annette Prince

Only in the last 125 years, really, has civilization mucked that up, starting with the skyscraper and the electric light bulb, both of which make for tough passage over the urban jungle.

Add to that the architectural innovation of the late 19th century, “the Chicago window,” a plate-glass span that lets in light as never before in the history of construction, and which seems to have stretched into endless acres of mirrored or transparent glass, shimmering glass towers that serve as “slaughterhouses for the birds.”

So says Daniel Klem Jr., an ornithologist at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., who has been studying bird-glass collisions for 35 years and who estimates that 1 billion birds a year are killed flying into glass in the United States.

“Glass is one of the world’s great bird killers,” Klem said recently, quick to pull out what he called his “sound-bite analogy”: It would take 333 Exxon Valdez oil spills to equal the number of birds killed each year crashing into windows.

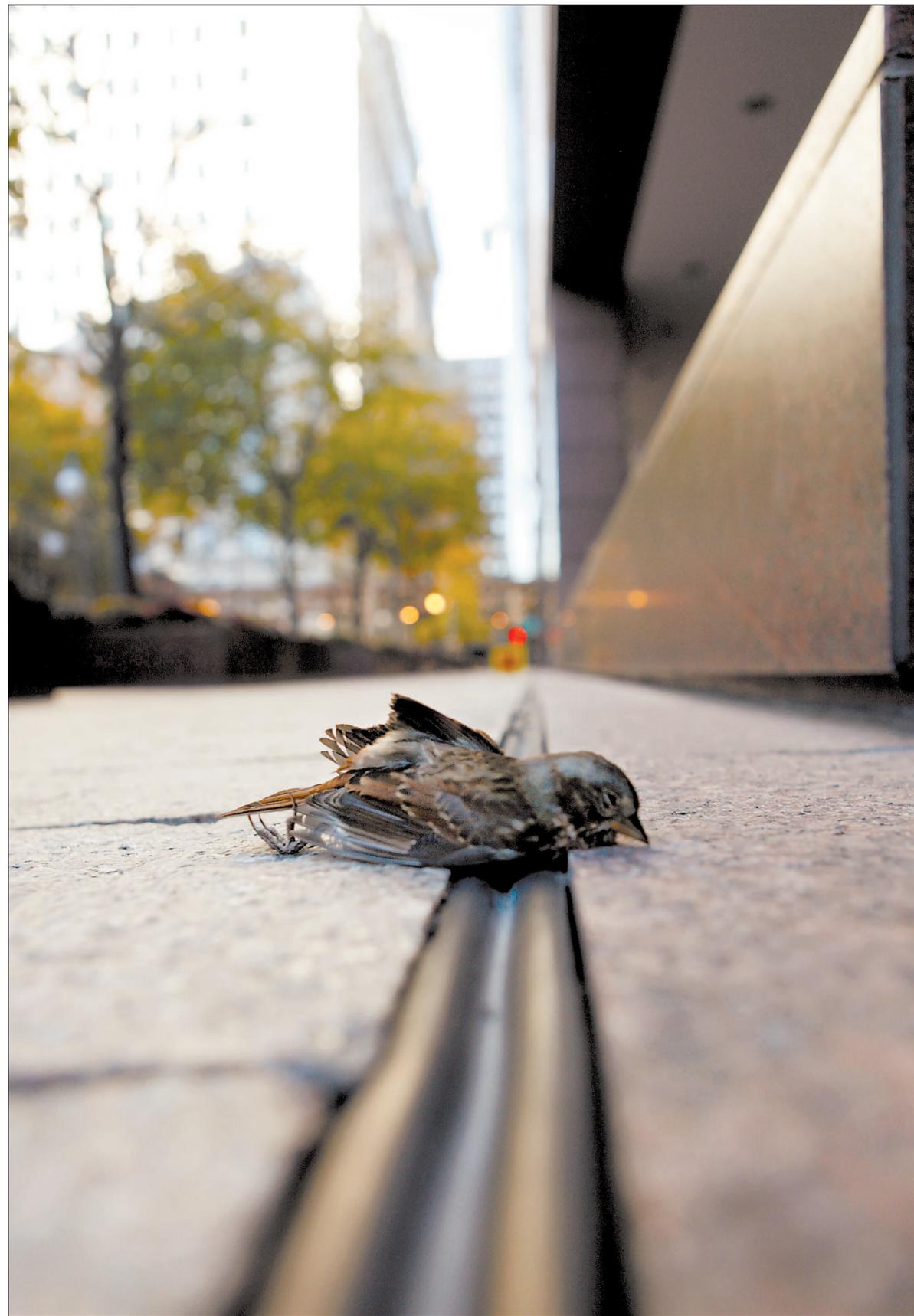
Chicago — with its 1,105 tall buildings (defined as 12 stories or more; the U.S. skyline second only to New York) and heaven only knows how much glass (Willis Tower alone has more than 16,000 windows) — is smack-dab in migration’s way.

“Chicago’s lakefront is world-famous for its bird population,” says Prince, loping through the Loop. “The Burnham Plan put it out there, all that green space. But Chicago is also the birthplace of the skyscraper. So what we gave, we take away.”

Annette Prince and her brigade

are but one band of a bird-backing effort that winds straight to the fifth floor of City Hall, behind the door marked Mayor Richard M. Daley. The mayor, who has been known to thrill at the sight of a great blue heron through his binocular lens, keeps close tabs on his city’s avian inhabitants, the ones that stick around and the fly-bys.

These days, building managers



A fox sparrow is among thousands of birds that perish during migration. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO

by the hundreds turn out lights during migration, dimming the nebula that was Chicago at night. (Even the John Hancock Center flicks off the 500 fluorescent lights in its emblematic 100th-story crown.)

Scientists on the mothball-per-

meated third floor of the Field Museum laboriously probe, preserve or dissect every dead bird that’s collected downtown or on the lakefront — some 2,250 so far this autumn — cataloging where cityscape and nature collide.

For 31 years, Dave Willard, the

willowy manager of the museum’s 500,000-specimen bird collection, the fourth largest in the world, has been walking the grounds of McCormick Place nearly every day before dawn during migration, collecting some 36,000 dead birds, from 155 species, making him one

of the most knowledgeable scientists on the subjects of migration and, inadvertently, bird-glass collisions.

He’s a chief proponent of cutting the city’s night lights, and a man the mayor calls when he wants a checkup on how the city’s doing by the birds.

Ever since McCormick Place began occasionally turning lights out in 1998, bird-crash deaths have dropped from an average of 1,500 per year to 600, according to records. On nights when all the lights are out, fatalities drop by 80 percent.

“There’s a cost to wanting summer in two hemispheres,” says Willard, of the songbirds’ hard-wired drive to spend half their year feasting in some of the insect-richer forests of the world, in Canada, and the other half down south in the tropics.

It’s a star-mapped flight that steers the flocks straight through Chicago.

The songbirds fly at night, when skies are clear of predators and cool winds aid their flight. Ornithologists know that baby birds memorize the constellations, navigate by the North Star, and literally follow the heavens from breeding ground to feeding ground.

It wasn’t till the mighty Hancock, all 1,127 hulking feet of it, went up in 1969 that anyone realized just how much the city had gotten in nature’s way.

That’s when birdman Bill Beecher, now deceased but at the time head of what was then called the Chicago Academy of Sciences, started getting calls about hundreds, even thousands, of birds crashing into Hancock windows, spilling down onto the sidewalk.

Beecher, never shy about ruffling feathers when it came to birds, piled up the dead in boxes — 1,000 birds in all, just one night’s toll, he claimed. Then, at the foot of Big John, with those cardboard coffins in plain sight, he invited in the news cameras. He had a hunch that sky-high lights were bad news to birds that cross the globe guided by the stars.

It would be another quarter-century, though, before the city made a megawatt effort to cut the lights.

In 1995, through a chance encounter with Daley on the sidewalk, a building manager named Linda Day Harrison found herself in charge of the Nature and Wildlife Subcommittee of the Mayor’s Landscape Advisory Task Force.

She felt like a fish out of water;

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