



Birds have recolonised spaces during lockdown that previously would have drowned them out. Photo: Patrick Kavanagh



MAY 5, 2020  
Updated May 5, 2020



**Yolanda Van Heezik**

Yolanda van Heezik is a wildlife biologist in the Department of Zoology at the University of Otago.



**Philip Seddon**

Philip Seddon is a wildlife biologist in the Department of Zoology at the University of Otago.



IDEASROOM

**Self-isolation's silver lining**

**n**  
Get your free daily briefing

**Among the many lessons learned in living through a global pandemic, we have been given a rare chance to pause and consider the natural world around us. Let's raise the bar as we return to 'normal'.**

Are you waking to the sound of korimako? Do there seem to be many more piwakawaka flitting around your head as you potter about in the garden? What's going on? Why do there seem to be so many birds around?

With most of us still spending more time at home everything seems just a bit quieter. Could this be the reason there are more birds about? We've seen and shared the images of fish in Venice canals, and coyotes near Golden Gate Bridge. In many places globally, wildlife are venturing into spaces they normally avoid,

apparently because in ordinary times the levels of human disturbance are too high.

One reason is that traffic makes noise that is different from natural noise, making it harder for animals that use calls to communicate with each other, to advertise themselves to mates, and warn others of a predator. In a traffic-filled noisy environment, birds might adapt by singing at different times of the day. Birds in cities sing more on Saturdays and Sundays because the level of disturbance is lower than on weekdays. Birds might also respond by singing louder to avoid being drowned out by background noise, or they might just give up and move away to somewhere quieter.

Quieter urban spaces are more attractive to the wildlife that lives in and on the fringes of cities, so during the lockdown there has been a gradual infiltration by our wild neighbours. But most of these species we are seeing in our near-empty streets are tolerant to human disturbance and co-exist with us in our cities, it's just we don't always see them or hear them. The lockdown propelled us into a world that allows us to notice the natural world around us. Less machinery noise will not

only encourage birds to sing, but will also make their song audible to us.

And perhaps most importantly our focus of attention has shrunk to our house, our garden, and our neighbourhood. Our own home office has become a wildlife hide where we can observe without being seen.

In 1995, Canadian fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly identified a problem in the management of commercial fish stocks whereby each succeeding generation of fisheries managers inherited increasingly impoverished fish stocks, but for each manager, this was the norm. Pauly termed this “shifting baselines”. This idea of shifting baselines has been applied more generally to where each generation grows up thinking the situation they are experiencing is the norm, unaware of the steady declines in the abundance of native species. If you don’t know how good things used to be, you cannot appreciate how bad things have become, and generation by generation, a wildlife-depleted world becomes a new normal.

More people live in cities than ever before. Our urban lifestyles are alienating us from the natural world. Sure,

Kiwis still get out into nature in Aotearoa, and we love our beaches and our bush. But fewer of us regularly access national parks, and for many of us, our interaction with green spaces is on the turf of sports fields.

There is no doubt that nature experiences are good for our health: 40 years of research have revealed a range of positive health benefits, physical and psychological. People who spend more time in their local green spaces have lower rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and lower incidence of high blood pressure. Most importantly, our own private green spaces – our gardens – play an important role in providing us with these health benefits.

Community-led eco-sanctuaries, where expensive predator-proof fences create safer havens for native species in patches of bush, provide us with a chance to reconnect with nature. But not everyone has an eco-sanctuary on their doorstep, and even when we are lucky enough to be close to one, many people never visit them.

So while National Parks and eco-sanctuaries can reset our expectations for what the natural world around us could and should look like, that is, they can lift our shifted baselines, we could achieve some of the same thing more locally in biodiverse backyards and public green spaces. The Level 4 lockdown has highlighted the importance for our health and well-being of being able to access nature, and the importance of our own gardens and local parks. However, the danger is that as soon as our lives and our noise return to normal, we might very quickly go back to the situation we knew before.

So don't let's forget the joy of birdsong as we emerge back into our busy intersecting lives. Don't neglect your local park. But also, think about how to make each of these things better. Think how you might make your own garden more bird and bee-friendly. Seek out and join community groups removing pest species or replanting abandoned land. Support your local government in creating and maintaining wild local parks.

Aotearoa is an extraordinary place to be, especially in times of global hardship. Our lives, our whānau, and our businesses have taken a hit, but recovery has started.

Among the many lessons learned in living through a global pandemic we should remember we have been given a rare chance to pause and to consider the natural world around us.

So - lift those baselines, take time to see the little things, move quietly, rejoice in the song of birds, and make biodiverse backyards and natural neighbourhoods our new normal.

Link: <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/05/05/1156693/self-isolations-silver-lining>