

Looking at what climate change will mean for California

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The songbirds at the feeder outside your window are not the same as they used to be. The goldfinch, the grosbeak and even the ever-present sparrow are all a little bit bigger.

The reason is climate change, according to a new study, which found that 70 bird species, all common to Central California, have evolved a longer wingspan and greater body mass over the past 40 years.

Scientists think such adaptations, in annual increments of less than a tenth of a percent on average, help birds cope with food shortages and stronger storms already triggered by climate change.

“We need to be thinking about things like extreme weather and other ways climate change is going to impact our ecosystems, and those things are not just important for birds,” said Nat Seavy, co-author of the bird study and research director at PRBO Conservation Science, a research facility in Petaluma. “They are important for farmers and all sorts of people.”

The evidence is just one piece of a new wave of research slowly painting a more vivid picture of what climate change may mean for California. The studies also reflect a new effort by scientists to help the public understand climate change by speaking plainly.

“We struggled mightily to translate these results into lessons that could be useful to policymakers and resource managers,” said James Cloern, a biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey

in Menlo Park and lead author of a comprehensive new climate study on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

“We don’t want to scare people with this paper. We want to put them in a position where they can start thinking and planning.”

Read the whole story