Daffodil Lecture: Paige Warren on Biodiversity
Professor Paige Warren delivered the Commonwealth Honors College’s annual Daffodil Lecture, “From a Silent Spring to a Noisy One,” held on April 9th at the Campus Center Auditorium. Warren discussed the growing domestication in the intersection of wildlife and cities, and how humans can adapt urban spaces to make cities better living environments for both us and animals.

Warren explained how animals are changing their demeanor and activities in response to human input. One example of this is “Anthropogenic Food,” or traditional American food, that Americans feed to birds or other animals. Feeding wildlife intentionally or unintentionally impacts the life of the animal, as in urban areas where birds are less likely to care about whether they are protected by a shelter while they are eating. These feeding interactions generate an increasing species of “fearless birds in the city.” There are changes in the number of species and how those species act as you move further from a city. One example she used was how places with more bird feeders have more house finches. When these birds had a disease called conjunctivitis, bird feeders spread it. However, bird feeders also defended them against the disease because it had generated a more substantial population. She explained that scientists observe this kind of impact along the adaptive actions of wildlife in cities constantly.

“Cities are sources of novelty, hotspots of resource inputs and drivers of evolutionary change,” Warren stated. Referring to the photo behind her, she added, “these birds use cigarette butts in their nests to keep away parasites that feed on the baby birds.”

She showed a diagram displaying a “human-centric food web,” where everything in a city is interconnected. This diagram showed how certain animals’ connections with humans are stronger than their historic connections with each other. She emphasized the importance of having space for nature, and how even the smallest open spaces can make a big difference in the variety of species living in a city. For example, one of her studies found that the equivalent of two parking spaces left unadulterated and allowed to grow into green spaces adds another species of bird to the biodiversity of the area.

“Now there are some species that no matter what we do will never be urban. We’re not going to be able to completely remake nature within a city, but we can have some of those things that make our places unique, and keep them from being homogenized if we’re intentional about it.”

Warren added how important it is to recognize inequalities in cities when doing her research. She discussed how important it is that all cities have access to green space, and how there are disparities along race, class, and socioeconomic lines in the quality of living in cities.

“The work that I’m most proud of explores access to green space and biodiversity in cities, and how that varies by race, class, and socioeconomic status,” Warren reflected. “Having access to green-space helps mental health, physical health, and overall sense of wellbeing.”

When asked about the impact of her talk on students, she articulated a desire for students to notice green space on UMass Amherst’s campus. “I hope that by talking about the fact that there are these little pockets of wild in the city, it brings to focus that they can have access to nature in daily life.” Warren hopes that students will see their campus in a different way. “See the campus in a different way because the campus really is a city, and our actions are interconnected with nature even when we’re in an urban area.”