PROPERTY MANAGEMENT
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

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Good Flight, Good Night

By Rick Love | May 1, 2026

Chicago property management teams face an unexpected challenge each year—bird migration.

But they're not just migrating, they're navigating an urban environment made of glass, lighting, brick, and concrete. To better understand the role buildings play in this phenomenon, we spoke with Gannon O'Brien, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Hiffman and former General Manager of 311 S. Wacker Drive, about how property managers can proactively respond.

For management teams, this isn't just an environmental issue, it's an operational one. From lighting strategies to building systems and tenant coordination, the decisions made on a day-to-day basis can directly impact both asset performance and the surrounding ecosystem.

Why It Matters

Millions of birds from more than 250 species migrate through Chicago each year, peaking between April 15th and June 15th and again from August 15th through November 15th. Bright lights, reflective glass, and illuminated interiors can disrupt their navigation, often resulting in exhaustion or fatal collisions.

While this may seem like an external issue, it's closely tied to how buildings are operated. Thoughtful property management—especially when it comes to lighting controls, energy use, and tenant engagement—can significantly reduce these risks while also improving operational efficiency.

This is where experienced management teams make a difference.

A Real-World Perspective

According to O'Brien, addressing migration-related risks often starts with practical operational decisions.

"At 311 S. Wacker, exterior lighting was turned off nightly after 11 p.m.," he explains. "During migration seasons, this practice aligned with Lights Out guidelines and helped reduce bird collisions while also lowering energy costs."

What begins as a cost-saving or efficiency measure can quickly evolve into a broader strategy—one that supports sustainability goals while enhancing building performance.

Making an Impact

Effective property management teams understand that small adjustments can have meaningful outcomes. During migration periods, that can include:

- Adjusting lighting schedules and reducing non-essential illumination
- Coordinating with tenants to limit after-hours lighting
- Leveraging automation systems such as timers and motion sensors
- Managing building operations schedules to align with daylight hours
- Incorporating sustainability considerations into day-to-day decision making

These actions don't require major capital investment. But they do require proactive oversight, coordination, and attention to detail.

Adding Value

At its core, this is a reflection of what strong property management delivers. Through a combination of hands-on operational oversight, facility management expertise, and strategic advisory, Hiffman National helps clients identify opportunities to reduce risk, improve efficiency, and operate more responsibly.

Whether it's optimizing building systems, managing vendor performance, or aligning operations with broader sustainability goals, the impact is both immediate and long-term. Situations like bird migration highlight how effective management extends beyond the building itself, requiring a balance of performance, responsibility, and forward-thinking strategy.

The Big Picture

Programs like Lights Out Chicago provide a helpful framework, but the real driver of impact is how buildings are managed day in and day out.

For property owners, the takeaway is simple: operational decisions matter. With the right management approach, buildings can reduce environmental impact, improve efficiency, and better serve both tenants and the communities around them.

Because in today's environment, successful property management isn't just about maintaining assets, it's about managing them with intention.
