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A Time of Nesting

By the end of May, most of spring migration has finished and the nesting season has moved into high gear. Most migrants from the tropics will have laid their eggs by the end of this month and will have young in the nest by the second week of June. Many resident birds and early-spring arrivals often begin a second brood by late May or early June, as well. Species such as American robins, eastern bluebirds and mourning doves have two and occasionally three broods in a season.

When songbirds arrive in the spring, the male immediately begins to establish a breeding territory and to attract a mate. The main way in which he does this is by song. The song's initial purpose is to attract a female to the territory he has selected, usually a piece of real estate about half an acre in size. Females generally arrive back from migration several days or more later than the male. In some species, females appear to choose their mates on the basis of their voice, selecting a male with the most prolific singing and the largest song repertoire. Other traits such as the intensity of the male's colours and the quality of the breeding territory itself also play an important role.

In addition to attracting a mate, singing also serves to advertise ownership of the breeding territory to other males of the same species. After all, if the male wants to pass on his genes to the next generation, he doesn't want an intruder breeding with his mate. To this end, males often sing a "secondary song", which sounds slightly different from the primary song. Birds tend to switch to the secondary song once they have secured a mate. Its message is simple: I have a mate and breeding territory and you are not welcome. Stay out! Once the female is incubating eggs and the male's genetic investment in the future seems secure, he will then go back to singing his primary song, possibly in the hope of attracting a second mate. One species in which the primary and secondary songs are quite different is the chestnut-sided warbler, a common songbird of the Kawarthas.

Judging by the intensity of the dawn bird chorus, the hours around sunrise are the busiest time of day for breeding birds. This is when songbirds of all stripes defend their territory most intensely through prolific song and noisy chases. Through song, birds are able to minimize dangerous and exhausting physical combat.

Most songbirds spend about two weeks incubating their eggs and another two weeks feeding the young before they leave the nest. For example, the incubation period for robin eggs is 12 to 14 days, with the young leaving the nest about 14 to 16 days after hatching. In robins, the female does almost all of the incubating and brooding, while the male takes care of feeding both his mate and the young ones. He will deliver protein-charged earthworms six or seven times an hour, allowing the chicks to increase their birth weight by a factor of 10 after only a week and a half. The male is also the primary caregiver once the fledglings have left the nest. He takes on the role of tutoring them in the art of finding their own food. In the meantime, the female will often be building a new nest and laying another batch of three or four eggs. Parasites tend to accumulate in the nest, often making it unsuitable for a second brood. Throughout the nesting period the male continues to pour out his familiar "cheerily-cheer up" song as he jealously guards his territory and mate from other male robins.

This is also the time of year when children often arrive home with an "orphaned bird".

However, most backyard baby birds that seem to be all alone and in trouble are simply awaiting the return of a parent to feed them. The chicks are in the fledgling stage, a period in which they leave the nest and hop around on the ground for a week or two before they learn to fly. The best thing you can do is simply leave them alone. If the bird seems to be directly in harm's way, you may want to hide it under nearby bushes or in long grass. If it is a featherless newborn that has fallen from its nest, you can put it back in the nest. It's a myth that the parents will reject an offspring that has been touched by humans. Because it is extremely difficult and time-consuming for humans to raise young birds successfully, only a tiny fraction of baby birds in the care of inexperienced people ever become fully functional adults that are able to survive on their own.

If you really want to make a difference in the survival of fledgling birds, keep your cat inside, especially during the spring and early summer. Canada alone has an estimated six million cats of which at least two thirds are allowed to roam outside. They kill untold millions of songbirds and other small animals every year. Along with habitat destruction, tall buildings and pesticide use, cats are one of the main reasons why so many songbird populations are plummeting in number.

It's important to dispel some myths, as well. One such belief is that declawed, well-fed cats with bells on their collars won't harm wild animals. Research has proven otherwise. It's also important to remember that cats have never been part of the natural food chain in North America and birds here have not evolved adaptations to avoid cat predation. In the final analysis, humans are the problem, not the cats. The felines are simply doing what comes naturally.

Surveys of the abundance of breeding birds are conducted during the nesting season. For example, data gathered in the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, presently in its fifth and final year of field work, will be used to determine distribution of species, status of rare species, and affects of habitat changes on breeding bird populations. This is the second breeding bird atlas for Ontario and will show what has changed in the past 20 years. Some of the preliminary data are already indicating alarming declines in a variety of aerial foragers such as common nighthawks, whip-poor-wills, chimney swifts, and barn swallows. Sandhill cranes and merlins on the other hand are expanding their range. These trends are quite evident in data gathered locally.

What to Watch for This Week:

The melodious calls of the gray treefrog have now joined the frog chorus. The slow, bird-like trills are about two seconds in length and will soon become the most familiar night-time sound of late spring. Many cottagers are familiar with treefrogs as the nocturnal visitors that gather around the porch light.

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