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LIVING

Spring brings birding back

Warm weather at Rondeau and Point Pelee arrived with host of rare sightings

Thanks to the southerly winds that finally materialized last Wednesday over Ohio and Lake Erie, the birds of spring were swept into southern Ontario, much to the delight of cold, frustrated birders awaiting their arrival. Jim Cashmore, Mitch Brownstein, Greg Piasetzki and I had once again chosen mid-May to enjoy the spectacle of the spring songbird migration at Rondeau and Point Pelee, two parks located on peninsulas that jut out into Lake Erie. Like all of the peninsulas on the lower Great Lakes, these parks attract a wide diversity of northward-bound, neotropical migrants in May. Being there to experience the migration is no less than a rite of spring for thousands of birders.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS



The weather provided a veritable roller-coaster of temperatures, ranging from only about 3 C on Monday and Tuesday, to the high 20s by mid-week and then down to a comfortable 12 C by Friday. Not surprisingly, the ups and downs of the thermometer have a big effect on bird activity. When we arrived at Rondeau on the frigid afternoon of May 13, most of the trees were not yet in leaf. Because the waters of the Great Lakes are slower to warm than the adjacent land, this "lake effect" creates cooler temperatures along the lakeshore than at points further inland. This, in turn, delays leaf-out. The birds would therefore have been easy to see, had they been active. The frigid temperatures, however, meant that most songbird activity had ground to a halt and the only birds singing were the orioles and wrens. Those warblers that were present - Yellow Warblers for the most part - were staying low to the ground.

OUT OF THE BLUE

Birders are always quick to share information about any rare or uncommon species that have shown up. This is how we learned that one of Ontario's rarest warblers, the Cerulean, was still present along the popular Maintenance Trail. As we headed over, we soon saw a cluster of about 10 very happy people with cameras and binoculars pointed towards the ground. Obviously, we had found our bird. Strangely enough, the action was happening right in the leaf litter, where the Cerulean was foraging about like a chipmunk, obviously searching for any invertebrate morsel that he could find. Only about six feet away most of the time, this blue and white beauty was absolutely stunning when it would occasionally hop up onto a fallen log or low branch and allow photographers such as my friend, Greg, a frustratingly short second or two to attempt a picture.

Fresh off the high of seeing the Cerulean, we were told by another birder that a very rare Yellow-breasted Chat had just been seen along the road leading to "Pony Barn." Sure enough, this very large but rather secretive warbler was hopping about in a dense tangle of willows and dogwoods on the



GREG PIASETZKI photos

A Cerulean Warbler (top) spotted at Rondeau Provincial Park last week was one of several birds rarely seen in Ontario that had arrived with warmer spring weather. Other highlights of several days birding at Rondeau and Point Pelee parks were (clockwise from above) a Brewster's Warbler, Wilson's Phalaropes and a Hooded Warbler.

roadside. Every so often, though, he would pop out of the brushy patch and display his beautiful gray-olive back, bright yellow throat and white eye "spectacles." I had not seen this species in over 20 years, and this was my first chat sighting ever for Rondeau. Our day was indeed off to a great start! Unfortunately, Greg and Jim were farther down the road when the chat put in an appearance and arrived back after the bird disappeared. They were quite pleased with a couple of consolation prizes they'd found, however - a Brewster's Warbler and a beautiful male Hooded Warbler. The Hooded's black crown and throat enclose a bright yellow face, making this one of the best-named and most distinctive warblers.

HYBRID WARBLER

While Greg and Jim stayed to try to relocate the elusive chat, Mitch and I went after the Brewster's. This bird is not a species in itself but rather the hybrid offspring of a Blue-winged and a Golden-winged Warbler. Like the

Cerulean, it seemed oblivious to the half-dozen birders that were following its every move. The many "oo's and awe's" I heard came as no surprise. This warbler's combination of a brilliant yellow crown, bright white underparts, gray back and black eye-line was stunning, especially against the brown leaves and emerging plants of the forest floor. This was the first time I had ever seen a Brewster's. Now I knew what all of the fuss was about. Later in the week, we would all see an equally rare Worm-eating Warbler under equally good viewing conditions.

QUIET TUESDAY

Tuesday ended up being a carbon copy of Monday, at least in terms of the weather. The birding was extremely slow and there was almost no song to be heard. For part of the time, we turned our attention to Rondeau's rich offering of ferns, wildflowers, trees and shrubs. Being in the Carolinian forest zone, species such as the tulip tree, American



sycamore, spicebush and fragrant sumac are quite common. Wild phlox and wild geranium grow throughout the park, as do beautiful Christmas and Sensitive ferns. However, the most impressive show last week came courtesy of the White Trilliums, Jack-in-the-Pulpits, Broad-leaved Toothwort and at least four species of violets.

TRAILS COME TO LIFE

With the arrival of warm weather on Wednesday - and the flow of warm air from the south that provided an important tail-wind - Rondeau's trails slowly came to life with more song and activity than we'd seen all week. A morning walk along South Point Trail produced 14 species of warblers and three kinds of vireos. Several flamboyantly red Scarlet Tanagers also added excitement, as did Orchard Orioles and Indigo Buntings. In the afternoon, Mitch and I drove over to the sewage lagoons near Blenheim where we had some wonderful, close-

up looks at Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlins, Lesser Yellowlegs and Wilson's Phalaropes. Once again, the birds were almost at our feet and absolutely stunning in the late afternoon sunshine.

It's at times like these that I truly understand the appeal of birding. At its essence, bird-watching is an exercise in focused awareness. Yes, at one level it is a hobby, but it is also a powerful means of developing mindfulness. When you are fully focused on finding, identifying or simply watching a given bird, it is possible to live entirely "in the moment" as your senses completely take over and the noise and intrusive thoughts in your head are swept away. Being fully aware of what is happening in the natural world around you is a doorway to a richer experience of life. I am most conscious of this state of mind when birding - and especially when birding in May. There is so much information for our senses to take in: the beauty, numbers and diversity of the bird themselves, the rich orchestra of bird voices from which each "instrument" clearly stands out, the smell of the spring blossoms and new leaves and the heat of the sun-warmed air on your back. By learning to see, listen, smell and feel, birding teaches us to truly pay attention.

ON TO PEELEE

On Thursday, we made the 70-minute drive to Point Pelee and joined hundreds of other birders, mostly from Quebec, Ontario, Michigan and Ohio. Some trails had more people than birds. However, it's still fun to be in the company of so many people with a common interest. The increasingly warm weather - 28 C by mid-afternoon - seemed to slow down the bird activity but not before Greg found his own Yellow-breasted Chat and the four of us got a good view of a sleeping Whip-poor-will. The highlight of the day, however, was watching a half-dozen species of warblers feeding intently on the female catkins of a willow tree that arched low over the DeLaurier Trail. What the birds were finding in the catkins remains a mystery but the Cape May, Nashville, Orange-crowned, Tennessee and Northern Parula were so focused on eating that they totally ignored us. On our way back to Rondeau, we also stopped at Hillman's Marsh where several hundred Black-bellied Plover were an impressive sight.

Friday morning back at Rondeau greeted us with much cooler temperatures but also with a surprising amount of bird movement. Dozens of warblers of 17 different species were streaming northward through the swampy forest at Maintenance Trail. With the help of several other pairs of eyes, we eventually found the two must-see species that had eluded us all week: the Canada and the Mourning. This pushed our warbler count to 30 species and our total bird count to 132. These numbers, of course, have no real importance other than 132 species of birds provided us with their own, unique expression of the wonder of spring migration - 132 vignettes of beauty to carry us through to September when fall migration beckons.

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