

September 28, 2004

A Time of Departure

It is hard not to feel melancholic in September as so many of the birds that have kept us company over the spring and summer are now leaving. And, like colour change in trees or the spawning times of fish, each species adheres to its own timetable.

Most songbirds, such as warblers, vireos and orioles, have already departed by late September, as they make their way to the more dependable food resources of the Caribbean islands and Central and South America. Last March, I had the privilege of catching up with some of these migrants in Costa Rica. In one tree I counted no less than 40 Baltimore Orioles, a dozen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and four Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, all feasting on the tree's ample supply of nectar. It was so strange to see them side-by-side with tropical species such as parrots and honeycreepers.

As the month draws to a close, hardier, seed-eating species such as White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows are now arriving in the Kawarthas along with Dark-eyed Juncoes. They will remain a common sight in our yards until late October. Be sure to scatter an ample supply of black oil sunflower seed on the ground, since these species rarely land on feeders. The loss of some of the seed to squirrels is a small price to pay for the spectacle of regal White-crowns adorning your lawn. Late September through mid-October is usually the busiest time of the year for bird activity at feeding stations, so make sure you don't miss the show.

Surprisingly enough, most Blue Jays also make a mass exodus southward this month and move through our region in large numbers. This is probably why the jay's raucous call is the most common bird sound right now. Along the north shore of Lake Erie, you can sometimes see thousands of Blue Jays in a single day in late September, as they stream towards Michigan and points southward.

Most species do not announce their departure as boisterously as Blue Jays or as clearly as the northern sparrows visiting your feeder. However, with a little effort, it is still possible to see the more secretive migrants such as warblers and vireos. Although these birds are not singing, they tend to travel in mixed flocks that usually contain very vocal chickadees. A rule of thumb of fall birding is to stop and "pish" any time you hear chickadees calling because there are usually migrants with them. Pishing is the birders' secret tool for drawing birds in for closer observation. It simply involves taking a deep breath and softly but rapidly repeating the word "pish" as you let the air out in one, slow exhale. Many bird species are curious about unusual sounds and come to investigate. Chickadees and nuthatches are almost always the first species to approach, but be sure to continue for at least another minute because the warblers are usually just a little slower to react. You will be amazed at how close to you the birds will come - once you get over the embarrassment factor of making strange noises in public.

Actually identifying the fall warblers can be a challenge, even if you get a good look at the bird. By late September, most of the warblers still migrating are immatures. Although some are easily recognizable, American Redstarts and Black-and-white Warblers for example, others are quite different from the adults. Don't worry about identifying everything you see. Just let the LYJ's (little yellow jobs!) flit on by.

As September draws to a close, we should be watching for the first southbound Canada Geese as they make their way from James Bay to wintering grounds in the Tennessee Valley. Unlike our partially-resident "Giant" Canada Geese which hang around until freeze-up, the northern Canadas fly in much larger, high-altitude flocks and call incessantly. There is no milepost of the changing seasons more poignant than the passage of geese. As much as it represents the sadness of fall bird departure in general, it is also imbued with the promise of another spring.

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