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Where are they now?

When it comes to coping with winter, most bird species that breed in the Kawarthas simply pack up and leave. Some go no further than the southern United States, while others - the so-called neotropical migrants - head to the West Indies, southern Mexico, Central America and even South America. Many of our backyard robins this week are hanging out in South Carolina; the chimney swifts of downtown Peterborough have traveled all the way to Chile and the Barn Swallows that nested in the boathouse at the cottage are scattered all the way from Costa Rica to Uruguay.

One of our best-loved species, the common loon, winters mostly on salt water in an area extending from Newfoundland to Mexico. Some of the largest concentrations of this species can be found along the Gulf coast of Florida. Dressed in their dull grey, nonbreeding plumage, winter loons look like a completely different species as they hunt the food-rich waters of bays and inlets for fish and crabs. Like most ocean birds, loons have a nasal salt gland by which their body gets rid of excess salt. Young loons may spend several years in coastal areas before returning to Ontario to breed.

Ospreys have one of the largest winter ranges of any bird, extending from Florida all the way to Argentina. Even members of the same osprey family will often choose different wintering sites. In a study which tracked one family's winter destinations, the male wintered in Chiapas, Mexico, while the female chose Venezuela. Of the two offspring, one bird ended up in Panama and the other in Columbia. Like loons, immature ospreys remain on their wintering grounds for the first summer. When you consider the different habitats, prey species and climates that an osprey must deal with over the course of a year, the adaptability of this species is amazing.

The ruby-throated hummingbird is another species known for its migratory accomplishments. A bird departing in mid-September from the Kawarthas flies first of all to the Gulf coast of the southern U.S., taking a week or so to make the journey. It must then fly non-stop across the Gulf of Mexico to the Yucatan Peninsula, a crossing that takes from 18 to 24 hours depending on the weather. After refueling in the Yucatan, the hummer takes a couple of more days to reach its final destination, usually somewhere between southern Mexico and Panama.

A number of neotropical migrants take on a whole new persona in the winter. Some species that are primarily insect-eaters during the summer will change to a winter diet that includes mostly fruit and nectar. Baltimore orioles and Tennessee warblers are two such species, visiting flowers for nectar and piercing berries to suck out the juice. Other behaviours change as well. On their winter territories, many of our warbler species travel in mixed flocks that include tropical birds such as greenlets and honeycreepers. Others, like our familiar yellow warbler, are solitary and territorial during the winter. This means that they actually defend a feeding territory against other yellow warblers.

The choice of winter habitat is often quite surprising, as well. Many species that breed in the Canadian Shield of northern Peterborough County often find winter refuge in shade-grown coffee plantations. In this traditional way of growing coffee, the coffee bushes are planted in and around the forest canopy where they are protected from the sun. Often, additional shade trees are planted as well. According to Audubon magazine (July-August 2004), shade-coffee farms are home to more bird species than any other agricultural landscape and are second only to untamed tropical forests in terms of their diversity of birds. The birds find plentiful food everywhere from the flowering canopy of the shade trees to the insects in the leaf litter. On the other hand, full-sun coffee

plantations are nearly devoid of birds. They also depend very heavily on fertilizers and pesticides. By buying shade-grown coffee from Latin America, you are helping to save crucial habitat for everything from rose-breasted grosbeaks and Swainson's thrushes to resident species like blue-crowned motmots and lined woodpeckers.

Compared to the size of Canada and the United States, the area where so many of our birds spend the winter months - southern Mexico to central Columbia and Venezuela - is very small. An acre of wintering habitat must therefore hold six or seven times as many birds as an acre of breeding habitat. Consequently, the loss of winter habitat through deforestation or tourism development can have a huge impact.

Many neotropical species are quite adaptable, however, and use a variety of different habitats in winter including suburban gardens, second growth forest and various types of agricultural land.. Because many of these same species are also experiencing serious population declines, we need to be looking at what is happening to them along the migration route and on their summer breeding territories. Among the many impacts on these species, we can include the fragmentation of forests and woodlots (a major problem in central Ontario), pesticide use, tall buildings and microwave towers, nest parasitism by cowbirds and predation by cats.

So, when spring rolls around, why don't migrants simply stay put, rather than run the risk of being killed during the long and arduous migration northward? There are two parts to the answer. Not only does North America offer a much greater land surface and more food and nesting sites, but migrants are able to take advantage of the much longer days of the northern summer to feed. Compared to the 12 hours or so of daylight available in the tropics, Peterborough offers 15 and half hours during the breeding season, while northern Canada can provide up to 18 hours of daylight in which to stalk insects and feed young. More food usually means more eggs being laid and a greater number of young being raised successfully. Greater nesting success would seem to outweigh the dangers of migration.

As a last word, we are probably being presumptuous to think of neotropical species as "our birds". Most species are only here from mid-May to mid-September, a period of just four months. It's much more accurate to think of hummingbirds, orioles and warblers as tropical species that make a brief trip northward in the summer to breed before heading home again for the other eight months of the year.

What to watch for this week:

If you are out walking or skiing in the woods, watch for the tan-coloured, papery leaves still clinging to the branches of young American beech trees. They are especially beautiful on a winter morning when the sun's rays pass directly through them. Dead beech leaves were used to stuff mattresses in pioneer times because they are not only soft but also springy and long-lasting.

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