

April 12, 2005

## **The Birds of April**

With longer days and warming temperatures, spring bird migration is quickly shifting into high gear. In addition to the throngs of waterfowl that now adorn our lakes and rivers, a large variety of other migrants are now arriving from their wintering grounds in the southern United States. Almost every day brings something new, so it's time to get out and enjoy the show.

Usually in the second week of April, a fascinating avian spectacle takes place along the Otonabee River. Like a living cloud, thousands of tree swallows swirl this way and that as they make their way north along this river highway. The Otonabee serves as both a natural corridor and supermarket. These blue and white birds feed heavily on tiny, mosquito-like flies called midges that emerge from the water and provide the swallows with the necessary energy for migration. Some midge species are able to fly at temperatures close to freezing. On the days when the largest number of migrant swallows comes through, the mass of birds often spills over onto adjacent streets including downtown Peterborough. Some years, I have observed well over 5,000 birds in a matter of hours.

My own interest in phenology, the science of observing and recording the annual cycle of "first events" in nature such as bird arrival dates, is tied directly to the tree swallow. For years, I would always see my first tree swallows over the Otonabee River at Trent University on or about March 26. I found this predictability fascinating. Tree swallow arrival is one of countless examples of natural events that almost always occur within a few days of the same date each year. In many ways, the annual occurrence of such events provides a reassuring counterbalance to the onslaught of change and uncertainty that characterizes modern life.

The swallows early arrival is not without its dangers. They regularly face freezing temperatures, wind and snow. I have even seen swallows in Little Lake Cemetery cowering behind headstones in an attempt to find refuge from the elements. Although spring storms undoubtedly kill some birds, most manage to survive. Tree swallows can often be seen picking flotsam off the river ice when nothing else is available. It is also reported that they will even eat berries in the early spring. I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has actually seen them doing so.

Another species that commands considerable attention in April is the American woodcock. A chunky, blue jay-sized bird with large eyes and a long bill, the woodcock is a somewhat aberrant member of the shorebird family. However, its claim-to-fame is its amazing courtship flight which has earned the species the name "sky dancer". From early April to late May, its nasal "peent", reminiscent of a toy horn, is a common sound in damp, open habitats such as abandoned fields bordered by second-growth forest. The peenting begins in the twilight period after sunset. As darkness falls, the calls become more numerous until the woodcock suddenly bursts into the air and climbs in wide circles to an altitude of about 100 metres. Although you may have trouble seeing the bird in flight, you will certainly hear the distinctive twittering sound of its wings as air rushes through the outer feathers, causing them to vibrate. The twittering stops, however, as the bird begins its zigzag descent. It is replaced by liquid, chirped notes that the woodcock actually sings. The chirping grows louder and louder as the bird approaches the ground. It then ends abruptly and the final portion of the descent is silent. Landing near the same spot from where it took off, the woodcock then walks stiff-legged in the direction of the nearby female and once again begins the peenting sound. The male will mate with any female impressed with his aerial display. A minute or

so later, the poor bird - which must be close to exhaustion - launches into yet another flight.

Woodcock can be found all over the Kawarthas. The fields south of the Peterborough Airport are often a good location, especially the area just east of Bartlett Road. Be sure to listen for the peenting sound. Because the darkening sky makes it difficult to actually see the woodcock in flight, try to face west so that the bird will stand out against the lighter, western sky. After it takes off, you can move closer to the take-off point. By remaining quiet and staying low, it is often possible to get a close look at the bird when it lands. The flights usually stop when total darkness falls, although some woodcock display at night when the moon is full. The birds will also display again at dawn. Woodcock watching on a calm April night with peepers calling in the background and the Orion constellation setting in the west is an event not to be missed!

Like the woodcock, there are many other April birds that make their presence known because of their distinctive sounds. The muffled drumming of the male ruffed grouse is certainly one of the most characteristic sounds of the month. The deep, resonating “put-put-put-put-purrrrr” throbs like an old gasoline motor starting up. You can almost feel the vibrations as much as hear them. As the bird rapidly beats its wings in a forward and upward motion, the air rushes between the stiff feathers, causing them to rapidly vibrate and produce the drumming sound. This amazing display serves to attract females when they are ready for mating and, presumably, to keep other males away. If you quietly sneak up on the drumming bird, you will usually find him on a log near the edge of a forest opening.

Woodpeckers are also very noisy this month. Listen especially for the courtship hammering of yellow-bellied sapsuckers on dead, dry trees or man-made surfaces such as metal chimney flashing or even street signs. These materials serve to amplify the drumming and therefore make it easier for the bird to advertise its presence. Unfortunately for those who like to sleep in in the morning, sapsuckers will return to a favorite sign day after day to pound out its message of love and territory. The sapsucker’s distinctive drumming pattern begins with five rapid taps, followed by gradually slowing taps. Both the male and female of this migratory species drum.

Backyard feeders, too, attract a coterie of interesting species in April. Watch for large numbers of northward-bound dark-eyed juncos and American tree sparrows filtering through all month long. White-throated sparrows should begin to show up late in the month, followed shortly after by white-crowned sparrows. The beautiful, thrush-like fox sparrow is also a species to be watching for. Be sure to put lots of seed on the ground if you want to attract sparrows.

By the time April draws to a close, the tide of migrants will swell to a veritable flood, as countless thousands of birds from the West Indies, Central and South America will begin to pour into the Kawarthas. As the green canopy develops overhead, the arrival of insect-eating songbirds such as warblers, vireos, orioles, tanagers and cuckoos will usher in May, the finest month of all for enjoying bird diversity.

What to watch for this week

If evening temperatures warm to at least 8 C, local wetlands should come alive with the clamorous calls of wood frogs, spring peepers and chorus frogs. Chorus frogs, sounding like a finger running over the teeth of a comb, call a great deal during the day, as well as in the evening.

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