

May 10, 2005

Welcoming the birds of May

The time of year that birders await with baited breath is now upon us. With May comes the final crest of spring migration and the arrival of long-distance migrants pouring in from the neo-tropics - Mexico, Central America, the West Indies and South America. Not only do their flamboyant colours symbolize the tropical habitats whence they've come, but their vigorous singing heralds that high spring is finally here.

It is possible to see more species at the height of migration in May than at any other time of year. Along with the birds' bright breeding plumage, constant activity and intense singing, the sheer variety of species to be seen make this the most wonderful birding month. In fact, during the Baillie Birdathon, a full day fund-raiser held each year in May, I usually see between 110 and 120 different species in Peterborough County alone! With the help of donations from individuals with an interest in nature, the money goes to Bird Studies Canada to help fund a wide variety of bird conservation projects.

An elegant synchronicity of events is occurring right now. As the green canopy of leaves develops overhead, countless caterpillars emerge to feast on the verdant bounty laid out before them. And, right on cue, hundreds of millions of birds pour into the province to regale themselves of this insect banquet. But, like with wildflowers, you need to be out looking and especially listening almost every day in order to take in the entire show. While some species will remain to nest in the Kawarthas, others pass through quickly as they continue northward. These birds won't be seen again until their southward migration in the fall. By far the best time of day to be out looking is the early morning, preferably before 8:00 a.m. Song is the key to the birds' presence, so it is helpful to begin to learn the different voices.

Surprisingly, neo-tropical migrants arrive on more predictable dates each year than those birds that winter in the continental United States. Early May sees the arrival of species such as the ruby-throated hummingbird, gray catbird, Baltimore oriole, bobolink, scarlet tanager, as well as about 16 species of warblers including yellow warbler and ovenbird. Sporting all of the colours of the rainbow, Ontario's 35 warbler species are the true gems of spring migration. With mid-May, watch and listen for red-eyed vireo, indigo bunting, eastern wood-pewee and more warblers such as the common yellowthroat. Bringing up the rear, late May brings us black-billed cuckoo, olive-sided flycatcher, mourning warbler, Canada warbler and common nighthawk, an increasingly rare species which may winter as far south as Argentina.

Why would a scarlet tanager risk a dangerous 6000 km journey to fly from Columbia all the way to Ontario? Obviously, there must be compelling reasons to migrate. In a nutshell, it is because the birds are able to raise more young. Protein-rich insects are abundant during the Canadian spring and summer, there is a much larger geographical area over which to spread and the long days allow birds to feed their young for up to six hours longer than if they had stayed in the tropics. Some studies also indicate that there is likely less danger from predators.

Although many of the mechanisms involved in migration are still poorly understood, we do have a good general idea of how the process works. First of all, birds have an intricate internal clock that controls the onset of migration. Environmental factors set the clock and keep it fine-tuned. It is thought that subtle changes in the bird's environment on the wintering grounds stimulate the production of hormones which, among other things, increase the bird's appetite.

This leads to heavy feeding to produce layers of new fat to fuel the flight northward.

A variety of different cues help birds navigate as they fly northward. Many species orient themselves in relation to the stars and constellations. Through an experiment with caged indigo buntings in a planetarium, Stephen Emlen, a behavioural ecologist, projected the spring sky on the planetarium ceiling and found that the birds oriented in the proper migratory direction. Specifically, they appear to use the patterns of stars around the North Star. Other cues used by birds to find their way include visual landmarks, the location of the setting sun, the earth's magnetic field and prevailing wind patterns. Wind patterns are seasonal and generally tend to blow in roughly the direction of migration, thereby providing a welcome "push".

Flying at an elevation of about 1000 metres, most songbirds migrate at night which allows them to see the stars and avoid predators such as hawks. If conditions are favourable, such as with the passage of a northward advancing warm front, birds will start migrating about one hour after sunset. It is quite common to hear their contact calls as they pass overhead on a warm May night. At sunrise, they usually land to rest and feed until conditions are favourable to continue northward. On average, a warbler such as the American redstart would cover about 150 km a day and take four to six weeks to fly from Cuba to the Kawarthas. Spring migration is usually quicker than in the fall, and the pace picks up as the birds get closer to their destination.

Changing weather conditions during the night can cause "groundings" of birds. When a northward moving warm front collides with a cold front, the warm air - and the birds flying in it - rises over the cold. The air cools, rain develops and the birds are forced to land. This means that rainy mornings in May can produce superb birding, especially when the rain is light and starts after midnight. On the other hand, long periods of fair weather with southerly winds allow the birds to fly later into the daylight hours and to disperse over a large area.

The male of a given species tends to arrive first. They are generally larger than females, more resistant to cold and often overwinter further north and closer to breeding territories. This allows them to arrive earlier in the spring and to acquire the best breeding sites. Many species also show "site tenacity", with the same individuals returning to the same nesting site year after year. This is especially so if they have successfully raised young there the year before.

You don't have to go far to see the birds of May. As long as there is sufficient cover, even city backyards can be graced by migrants. Some, like migrating indigo buntings and rose-breasted grosbeaks, will often come to feeders, as well. Habitat edges are especially worth checking - woodlot edges, hedge rows, wooded roadsides and the shrubby borders of wetlands. Some specific areas that are often productive include Jackson Park, the trails of the Trent University Campus, the rail-trail between Peterborough and Lakefield, Miller Creek Conservation Area, Herkimer Point at Hiawatha and Petroglyphs Provincial Park. Get out early though and remember to listen.

What to watch for this week:

Listen this week for the long, fluid trills of American toads. Lasting up to 30 seconds, the calls can often be heard both day and night. When more than one male is singing, each individual usually adopts a slightly different pitch.

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