

September 20, 2005

September Birding

When it comes to birdwatching, September is to fall what May is to spring. Migration is in full swing and, with some effort and a bit of luck, birding can be excellent.

In the city, one of the most noticeable migrants right now is the blue jay. It comes as a surprise to many people that most of the Ontario blue jay population makes a mass exodus south this month, although some do remain for the winter. The raucous calls of small flocks of jays is, in fact, one of the most characteristic sounds of September.

American robins have also become quite noticeable in recent weeks. They are now mostly in flocks that often appear in suburban yards. The local robin population has swelled considerably as of late since robins from further north have now moved southward into our area. The number of young birds among these newcomers has been particularly encouraging. I hardly saw any baby robins in the city this summer, as most probably fell prey to cats, raccoons and other urban predators. Young robins can be quickly identified by the spotting on the breast.

Robin behaviour is quite different in the fall. The birds appear possessed of a restless urgency as small groups nervously fly from one tree to another. It's as if they've rediscovered their ancestral wildness. Fall robins are seen far less frequently on lawns, tending to prefer fruit trees, hedgerows and forest edges where they can gorge themselves on berries. They are particularly fond of mountain-ash, dogwood, black cherry and European buckthorn berries at this time of the year. On rainy days following the passage of a cold front, you can also see them on wet, leaf-strewn roads, where they are presumably finding earthworms forced out of the ground by the rain.

Other species traveling in large flocks these days include American pipits, American crows, ring-billed gulls and a variety of blackbirds. Pipits can be found in fields of winter wheat as well as fields that have been recently ploughed. They are often joined by killdeer in these habitats. In and around corn fields and wetlands, watch for large numbers of common grackles, red-winged blackbirds and European starlings. By early October, rusty blackbirds arriving from northern Ontario will also join these flocks. They are a lesser known blackbird species but very attractive with their rust coloured feathers and pale iris.

However, I have always felt that the most enjoyable part of autumn birding is the challenge of identifying the fall warblers. In some ways, warbler-watching is actually better in the fall than in the spring. The daily stream of birds is steadier and less dependent on the vagaries of the weather. The migration period is also much longer, extending from early August, when the first yellow warblers migrate through, until late October, when the last of the yellow-rumped warblers are seen.

When Roger Tory Peterson first published his "Field Guide to the Birds", he unfortunately set a negative tone regarding the identification of fall warblers. On two pages entitled "Confusing Fall Warblers", he presented the dingiest, drabest and least remarkable of these birds, leading some people to believe that all fall warblers are nearly impossible to identify. Such is not the case. Some warblers do not change at all in the fall (e.g., American Redstart, black-throated blue warbler) and many change only slightly from their bright spring plumage (e.g., black-throated green warbler, chestnut-sided warbler). Immature birds present the biggest challenge, especially when it comes to telling apart the blackpoll and the bay-breasted warbler.

The easiest way to find warblers in the fall is to listen for the calls of chickadees. Warblers, along with other migrant species such as red-eyed vireos, tend to feed in mixed flocks which almost

always include chickadees. Because all of these birds are very inquisitive - and especially so in the fall -, they will come in quite close if you use the “pishing” technique. I can’t over-emphasize just how effective pishing can be. It simply involves taking a deep breath and softly but quickly repeating the word “pish” or “psst” as you let the air out in one, drawn-out exhale. Initially, you’ll probably have to pish fairly loudly, but you can lower the volume once the birds get closer. Continue pishing for at least a couple of minutes to give all of the different species a chance to make their way towards you. The chickadees will come in first, but the warblers won’t be far behind. Don’t be surprised if you end up with birds practically within arms reach!

If you want to see shorebird and raptor migration, you’ll have to travel south to the shores of Lake Ontario. There are two excellent locations, each only an hour from Peterborough. Presqu’ile Provincial Park offers great shorebird watching throughout September and October. Most of the action is happening along the shoreline between Beach Three and Owen Point. This area is managed specifically as shorebird habitat. A path with several viewing stations allows for close-up views of the birds. A spotting scope, however, is still quite useful. Your first stop, however, should be the sightings board in the campground office parking lot. Here you can find out what species of interest have been recorded in recent days. To reach Presqu’ile Provincial Park, take the 401 east to Brighton and then follow the signs to the park.

Every day through to the end of November, anyone is welcome to join the enthusiastic group of birders who are monitoring the fall hawk migration at Cranberry Marsh in Whitby. This takes place every day from around 9 a.m. to 1p.m. (depending on the weather - the winds, sky conditions and temperatures). Take the 401 to Whitby and exit at Brock Street. Take Brock south to Victoria. Travel west on Victoria to Hall's Road (almost at Lake Ridge Rd.) Take Hall’s Rd. south to the second roadside parking area. Some of the many raptor species you may see include bald eagle, golden eagle, sharp-shinned hawk, broad-winged hawk and peregrine falcon.

Finally, a very special dimension of fall migration can only be appreciated after dark. With a little patience and an attentive ear, migrants can often be heard calling as they fly overhead in the darkness. Although identification to species level is difficult, you can often tell what family or genus of birds you are hearing. Around the middle of September, there are often large flights of thrushes. Their loud, plaintive calls are quite distinctive in the night sky and can easily be heard even in the city. Listening to these beautiful creatures streaming southward in the darkness, it’s hard not to feel melancholic as the birds of summer once again return to their tropical homes.

What to watch for this week:

Woolly bears, the familiar fuzzy caterpillars with brown and black bands, are often seen in early fall crossing roads in search of a site to overwinter. People used to believe that you could judge the adversity of the coming winter by the width of the brown band in the middle - the narrower the band, the milder the winter would be. Woolly bears spend the winter curled up under a log. In the spring, they spin a cocoon and emerge as white Isabella moths.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature’s Year in the Kawarthas*.