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LIVING

Where do they go?

The winter lifestyle of 'our' songbirds has an impact on their activities in the Kawarthas

When songbirds such as hummingbirds, orioles and warblers leave the Kawarthas in the early fall, we rarely stop to think about where they are headed or what sort of existence they lead on their wintering grounds. In fact, ornithologists themselves only started paying attention fairly recently to the winter lifestyle of "our" songbirds. As surprising as it may sound,

these often colourful species actually spend a lot more of the year sharing habitat with parrots, iguanas and fig trees than they do with chickadees, beavers and maples. Therefore, to really appreciate the extraordinary lives of the neotropical migrants that nest in the Kawarthas, it's important to understand what life is like for them in the winter as well.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Every fall, somewhere between five and 10 billion birds fly from Canada and

the U.S. to wintering grounds in the neotropics. The majority head to Mexico and Central America, but many also winter in northern South America and on the islands of the Caribbean, especially Cuba and Jamaica. Because of the much smaller land area in the neotropics as compared to North America, our warblers, vireos and other songbirds are packed in very tightly. In Costa Rica, for example, the Tennessee warbler, which nests in northern Ontario, is one of the most abundant birds in the entire country during the winter months.

We might assume that the songbirds we know so well from summer essentially carry on a similar lifestyle in the winter. This is usually not the case, however. In fact, many species can seem like completely different creatures on their wintering grounds.

Whereas in the summer an American redstart might be typically found feeding along a picturesque forest edge in cottage country, the winter version of the same bird can just as easily be seen catching flies in a Cuban barnyard or around an outdoor privy.

Practically all habitat types in the neotropics are used by North American migrants in the winter. These can range from dry forest, montane forest, rainforest and mangrove to shade-grown coffee plantations and suburban backyards. Some species, like black-and-white warblers, are generalists, and occupy many kinds of wintering habitat. Most neotropical migrants, however, have fairly tight restrictions on what constitutes a suitable environment. This puts them at risk from habitat destruction such as deforestation.

For example, the winter range of the cerulean warbler, a rare species in the Kawarthas, is limited to the eastern Andean foothills of Columbia and neighbouring countries. Conversion to agriculture — including cocaine fields — is putting the cerulean's future in jeopardy. It is also believed that species like the Kirtland's warbler of northern Michigan used to occupy a much larger nesting range than they do now. Their range may have even included central Ontario. However, the near-total destruction of their winter habitat in the Bahamas means that there is simply not enough room to accommodate large numbers of these birds when they fly south. This, in turn, limits the size of the nesting population.

Still, there is some good news, too. Many migrants eat a diet high in fruit during the winter. Therefore, large concentrations of our songbirds are often found in areas where fruit trees prosper. Several studies have found that disturbed habitats with young forests offer the most fruit availability.



ty. Baltimore orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks and scarlet tanagers, for example, are attracted to fig and cecropia trees in these habitats. In fact, many North American migrants are believed to be important seed dispersers of plants that grow in these disturbed areas. Because many of these same birds also feed on nectar, they are now being recognized as potential pollinators of many tree species. It's strange to think of these familiar Ontario birds as key players in tropical ecosystems.

Researchers have also found that some birds actually migrate to precisely the same wintering ground year after year. This phenomenon is known as winter site fidelity and is common among species such as ovenbirds, wood thrushes and gray catbirds. By setting up fine-mesh nets, they have been able to catch the same banded individuals, at the same exact locations, in the same nets, over succeeding winters. Since there is only so much food to go around, these species are territorial even in the winter, and defend their chosen site against other individuals of the same species. Wood thrushes have been found to use subtle calls and body posturing to let other thrush intruders know they are on private property.

The majority of neotropical migrants, however, do not establish and defend a particular territory during the winter. They tend to be somewhat opportunistic, and range over large areas in the pursuit of food. Some migrants, like the magnolia warbler, a common bird of Shield country in the Kawarthas, even join up with feeding flocks of tropical birds of many different species. They all get along quite peacefully.

In recent years, a lot of research has focused on how to link winter events in an

individual bird's life with breeding success in the summer. The cornerstone of this research is the use of "isotope signatures". Isotopes are atoms of the same element but with different masses. Isotope data can be used to find out from where the atoms in a specific bird are derived. When birds eat, they take in elements that characterize the location where they were finding the food, be it a lush mangrove swamp or a dry scrub. A tiny sample of blood can therefore tell researchers the type of habitat in which the bird spent the winter. This is important because the quality of their winter diet affects when the birds arrive back on their breeding grounds. Researchers have found, for example, that redstarts that overwinter in food-rich mangrove forests come back much earlier in the spring than redstarts that have to settle for lower-quality habitat like scrub woodland. When a bird arrives back on its breeding ground is the most important predictor of reproductive success. Getting back early allows the bird to choose the best nesting sites and the best prospective mates. It might also give them a second chance at nesting if the eggs are eaten by predators.

So, when your favourite cottage songbirds return next May, remember to think about where they've been for the last eight months. Whether they were making a living deep in a Panamanian rainforest or eking out an existence in some Costa Rican banana plantation, the quality of their lives in winter can be just as important to their survival and reproductive success as what happens when they are back here in the Kawarthas.

What to watch for this week

Throughout the late fall and winter, gray



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

So-called Canadian birds like the rose-breasted grosbeak (left) and the American Redstart actually spend more of the year sharing habitat with Costa Rican iguanas (below) than with Ontario beavers.



Michelle Monkman, special to The Examiner

squirrels can often be seen high up in Manitoba and Norway maples where they feed on the keys. As for the red squirrel, its coat is now a brilliant russet. It is also much thicker than the summer coat.

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