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LIVING

Coffee for the birds

For several nights in a row last week, the number of migratory song birds passing over our house was truly impressive. Their soft, plaintive contact calls filled the sky. On such occasions, I can't help but wonder what fate awaits these travellers when they arrive

back on their Latin American wintering grounds. Will the patch of greenery that sustained them last winter still be there?



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Depending on the species, winter habitat in the neotropics can range from rainforest to suburban backyard. However, for a large number of species, many of which breed right here in Peterborough County, refuge from October through March is often found in shade-grown coffee plantations. This is a traditional way of growing coffee

that exists in relative harmony with the forest. In fact, shade-grown farms are home to more bird species than any other agricultural landscape, and are second only to undisturbed tropical forests in bird diversity. Unfortunately, coffee growing practices introduced over the past 20 years or so are making shade-coffee plantations a threatened habitat and, in the process, contributing to serious declines in a multitude of bird species.

Most of the songbirds — warblers, vireos, flycatchers, orioles, tanagers, thrushes, etc. — that nest in the Kawarthas overwinter in southern Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean islands and the northern South American countries of Venezuela and Colombia. Over much of this relatively small area — at least in comparison to Canada and the United States — the original forest has been greatly disturbed. However, even though shade-grown coffee plantations are human-managed habitats, they continue to support large populations of forest-dependent migrants. They are also home to such amazing Latin American resident birds as parrots, toucans and trogons. In total, more than 150 species of birds have been identified on shade coffee farms.

What exactly is shade-grown coffee? Up until recently, coffee has always been grown under a canopy of trees that provides shade. This is because traditional varieties of coffee do not grow well in direct sunlight. The shade trees also protect the bushes from damaging wind and rain, snuff the growth of weeds, and stabilize soil on erosion-prone slopes. Even more importantly, they fix nitrogen in the soil, which helps to foster the growth of the coffee bushes. Also, organic matter from the trees provides a natural mulch which helps to maintain soil quality. This, in turn, reduces the need for expensive chemical fertilizers. Coffee bushes grown in this manner can continue to produce berries for decades. So, for the most part, shade-coffee farms produce both an organic and sustainable product.

Why these farms are so attractive to birds is easy to understand. The trees provide a veritable smorgasbord of insects, nectar and fruit. Worms and insects abound, too, in the leaf litter covering the soil below. As the birds feed, they become important allies in pest control and reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides.

If you are ever fortunate enough to take a trip some winter to a shade-coffee farm — accommodation is actually available in some farms in southern Mexico — an early morning walk will reacquaint you with a host of familiar species: flocks of Baltimore orioles and Tennessee warblers drinking nectar from flowers, high in the trees; rose-breasted grosbeaks using their large seed-eating bills to dine on fruit, and wood thrushes and ovenbirds rummaging through the leaf litter for insects. In fact, the Tennessee warbler's



Rick Stankiewicz, special to The Examiner



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Clockwise, from top: coffee bush with ripening berries growing in a Costa Rican shade-coffee farm; a wood thrush; a rose-breasted grosbeak; and the Bird Friendly seal that appears on many shade-grown coffees, from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center.

affinity for shade-coffee farms has earned it the nickname of "coffee warbler."

The area covered by shade-grown plantations is quite substantial. In southern Mexico for example, shade-coffee plantations occupy an area more than half the size of all of this region's tropical forest reserves put together. More importantly, they provide critical woodland habitat in mid-elevation areas where the original forests have almost entirely disappeared. On just one farm in southern Chiapas near the Pacific coast, 60 species of migrants from North America have been counted over the years. It is these birds that connect shade coffee plantations in Latin America with backyards and cottages in the Kawarthas.

Coffee used to be one of the world's most benign crops. Now, however, all of this is changing. In a process called "technification," many farmers are replacing older, shade-loving coffee varieties with hybrids that can survive in the open sun and provide much larger yields. Sun-grown coffee can deliver three times the bean production of shade-grown varieties. But there is a trade-off. These new coffees require large inputs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, in part to replace the natural mulching and pest control provided by the trees and birdlife. This places heavy financial demands on the growers and the need for credit. Consequently, most sun plantations belong to large land-

holders. This often has serious social ramifications as farmers are pressured to sell their land and go to work for agribusiness. Although farmers may make more money working for these companies, they often end up exposing themselves to the chemical fertilizers and pesticides that are used in large quantities.

Sun coffee causes a host of other problems as well. These include soil erosion, acidification, higher amounts of toxic run-off and the loss of the tree canopy. Very few species of birds can live in these coffee-bush monocultures. According to studies carried out in Colombia and Mexico, sun-grown coffee plantations support 94 to 97 per cent fewer bird species than shade-coffee farms. They have been described as "avian deserts."

While there are exceptions, coffees from southern Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, Honduras, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala are primarily shade-grown. Coffees from Colombia, Brazil and, to some extent, Costa Rica, are more likely to be sun coffees. Costa Rica does produce many excellent shade-grown varieties as well.

So, whenever you purchase coffee, you are making a decision that impacts on bird populations. By choosing shade-grown coffee, you are not only helping to protect migratory birds, but you are buying a product that tastes better — the beans mature more slowly in the shade and natural sugars enhance

the flavour — and is probably healthier because few or no chemicals have been used in growing it. Although this coffee costs more, there is real satisfaction in drinking an organic, bird-friendly product that directly benefits small-scale farmers.

Just because a coffee is called shade-grown doesn't mean it is necessarily bird friendly. Fortunately, there are now certification programs that guarantee that certain brands are grown in ways that protect birds and other species. Consumers need to look for the Bird Friendly or Rainforest Alliance seals on the package to make sure that the coffee comes from authentic shade-grown farms. The Bird Friendly program was actually launched by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in the mid-1990s. You may also see the Fair Trade Certified label. This indicates that the farmers have received a sufficient price for their coffee, are small-scale producers in democratic co-ops, and use ecologically sustainable methods. Fair Trade doesn't always mean shade grown, so it is important to look for other certifications as well. Shade-grown, bird-friendly coffees such as Cameron's Coffee, an importer and roaster based in Port Perry, can be found in many natural food stores and cafes. In Peterborough, look for them at Joanne's Place, Planet Bakery, Hunter Street Cafe, Silver Bean Cafe, Main Ingredient Natural Foods and Dreams and Beans. In Lakefield, try In a Nutshell.

Shade-grown, bird-friendly coffee remains very much a niche market. A few grocery store chains do offer some varieties but they may require special searching. Other than Starbucks on Rye Street, I do not believe that any of the large coffee shop chains offer customers a shade-grown choice, at least not here in Peterborough.

Only when consumer awareness and demand increase will the future of shade-grown farms — and the birds that live there — be more secure.

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