

## Where spring resides

Bare trees, remnant patches of snow, and a gray and somber sky were the best late winter could offer as we crossed the border at Gananoque and headed south on Route 81 towards Myrtle Beach. Soon, however, signs of spring's approach were evident in the red-winged blackbirds staking out territories in roadside marshes and a trio of turkey vultures soaring northward. Small flocks of grackles, too, were part of the Canada-bound trickle of migrants, gingerly pressing north despite winter's tenacity. The succession of spring migrants is as fixed as the sequence in which wildflowers bloom. But these birds were only the first ripples of the huge wave of migrants that will flood the Kawarthas come April and May.

For several weeks, my wife and I had been looking forward to leaving winter behind and getting a preview of spring and its attendant flowers, migrant birds, and warm weather. I have had several occasions during the March Break to observe restless Baltimore orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and yellow warblers in Costa Rica and Panama as they prepare for their long flight back to North American breeding grounds. However, I had never been to the southeastern U.S. at this time of year and was looking forward to intercepting some of the temperate zone migrants such as white-throated sparrows and yellow-rumped warblers as they, too, begin their annual push northward.

I have also fantasized of following spring's progression north in the same way as Edwin Way Teale, a much-loved American naturalist of the 1950s and 60s. Teale wrote "North with the Spring" which chronicles his 17,000 mile journey by car up the eastern states as he slowly moved northward with spring, all the way from Florida to Maine. In Teale's words "Spring advances up the United States at the average rate of about fifteen miles a day...It sweeps ahead like a flood of rising water, racing down the long valleys, creeping up hillsides in a rising tide."

A little science might be helpful at this point. As spring approaches and our hemisphere tilts increasingly towards the sun, the angle of the sun's rays becomes more direct. Compared to winter when sunshine only strikes us with a glancing blow and provides relatively little heating, the spring sun hits the northern hemisphere more directly which results in more heat. And all of nature responds accordingly. For example, migrating American robins more or less follow the three-degree isotherm (a line joining locations where the average daily temperature reaches 3 C) as it moves northward. As soon as the average temperatures of the ground reaches 3 C and the frost melts, earthworms start moving towards the surface, providing the robins with food.

We spent the first night of the trip in the historic town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, which was the site of the battle with the largest number of casualties in the American Civil War. As I was packing the car for an early-morning departure, the bird chorus was already about a week ahead of what I was hearing in Peterborough. The main voices were red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, and grackles, none of which had arrived yet in the Kawarthas. The first sign that the trees were beginning to awaken

to spring's advance was evident by the time we got to Washington, D.C. where the red maples were already flowering. By Richmond, Virginia, with temperatures now in the mid-20s, the cherries, forsythia, and daffodils were all in bloom, and the lawns and fields were completely green.

Crossing into North Carolina, many of the crabapples were flush with flower as were the redbuds, a native species whose range extends as far north as Point Pelee, Ontario. The showy red flowers put on quite a display, and I couldn't get over how common the tree was. Around mid-day, we stopped at a beautiful roadside rest area where pine warblers were singing from the ubiquitous loblolly pine trees. Pine warblers usually don't arrive back in the Kawarthas until late April, so it was nice to get an advance performance of their song. The first butterflies started to appear in North Carolina, wasps and bumblebees were flying about, and some of the willows were already awash in emerging leaves.

The above-average warmth stayed with us during our five days in the Myrtle Beach area and helped to make things look and feel like early to mid-May in the Kawarthas. The morning bird song was especially hard to miss. But the dominant voices this far south were all southern specialties such as Carolina wrens, mockingbirds, and tufted titmice. One of the mockingbirds sang near-perfect renditions of blue jay, starling, and even phoebe calls.

To be honest, much of the Myrtle Beach area is a naturalist's nightmare, given the degree of development. However, with a bit of searching, there were interesting observations to be made. The beach itself is beautiful, and there was a surprisingly large assortment of seabirds right in front of our hotel. These included laughing gulls, Bonaparte's gulls, Forster's terns, double-crested cormorants, brown pelicans, willets, and a lone black-bellied plover. It was also interesting to see dolphins feeding only about 100 feet off shore. Yellow-rumped warblers flitted about almost everywhere trees and shrubs were present. This common breeding species of the Kawarthas winters in the Carolinas – further north than any other warbler - thanks to its ability to digest the waxes found in the fruit of bayberry and wax myrtle shrubs. The bird's old name of myrtle warbler comes from its habit of eating myrtle berries. The yellow-rumped is also the first warbler to return to the Peterborough area in the spring.

Having quickly had our fill of Myrtle Beach's shopping opportunities, we drove down to Murrells Inlet, the site of a large saltmarsh with an excellent boardwalk and interpretive signs. Unfortunately, we were there at high tide and missed out on views of the mudflat and its interesting array of creatures such as mud snails and oysters. From the boardwalk, however, we were able to see several winter-plumaged common loons as well as a half-dozen greater yellowlegs, a species that usually passes through the Kawarthas in April. Oystercatchers, egrets, herons, pelicans and several species of ducks were also present.

Our most interesting day for natural history, however, was at Brookgreen Gardens. The 9,200 acre property is a diverse mix of forested swamps, salt marsh, sandy ridges and fresh tidal swamps. It is also a testament to the natural landscapes of this area before development went crazy. Brookgreen is probably best known, however, for its sculpture gardens and its 250 year-old southern live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*). These

magnificent trees alone are worth the price of admission. The limbs of live oaks are covered with epiphytic plants such as resurrection fern and Spanish moss. The latter is actually not a moss but rather a type of bromeliad, the family to which pineapples belong. The “moss” hangs in garlands which impart a uniquely southern ambiance. The oaks, which were planted in the early 1700s when Brookgreen Gardens was a thriving rice plantation, were already in flower and heavy with pollen. In the nearby gardens, tulips, Narcissus, Viburnums, daffodils, snowdrops, magnolias, and yellow jessamine were already in bloom.

If you’ve ever wondered where well known Algonquin Park birds like white-throated sparrows hang out in winter, well Brookgreen is one of those places. The birds were literally everywhere, scratching about in the leaf litter and calling to each other with quiet “seep” notes. At one point I stopped to make some “pishing” noises to draw the sparrows in closer. Within seconds, branches only six feet away were adorned with not only white-throats, but also cardinals, eastern towhees, tufted titmice, yellow-rumped warblers, and Carolina wrens. It was one of the best responses to pishing I’ve ever had! Over the course of the afternoon, we added other interesting birds to our trip list including parula warblers and even a threatened loggerhead shrike. I couldn’t help but wonder if I might be looking at one of the birds that nest in the Carden Alvar near Kirkfield. Carden is one of the last strongholds of the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike in Canada.

When we left Myrtle Beach, we drove south to Charleston, stopping briefly at the education center of the Francis Marion National Forest. Birders often come to this area to see the rare red-cockaded woodpecker. In the parking lot, a pair of bluebirds was perched on each of the side view mirrors of a brand new Porsche 911. They were no doubt attracted by their reflections in the mirrors and must have thought that another pair of bluebirds had invaded their territory. The juxtaposition of a fragile, environmentally iconic species like a bluebird, pecking at the mirror of a car that represents the height of consumerism, was an interesting one.

We spent the last day of the trip in Charleston, touring its historic downtown and enjoying the spectacular weather. We then headed north again, this time following a route that took us through western Virginia before crossing back into Canada at Buffalo. It was like moving backward in time as cherry blossoms and yellow jessamine flowers gave way to gray hillsides and, eventually, snow. Maybe some day I’ll have the opportunity to experience spring as Edwin Way Teal did, and slowly travel northward, right alongside spring’s advancing edge. For now, however, the foretaste of the season offered up by a quick trip to South Carolina will have to suffice.

