

## **Bird migrants linger during the fall**

### **Birds I View**

**Bill Montevecchi**



Semi-palmated Plover and Sandpiper on the beach at Musgrave – a stopover  
on their migration to South America

The crisp diminishing days of autumn provide an invigorating environment for humans and non-humans alike. Outdoor activities are on the go - wood cutting, hunting, berry-picking, and yes the flitting flocks and movement of birds.

Avian pair bonds are weakening, as birds aggregate in larger family and social groups. Chipping and chittering mixed species flocks of landbirds are on the move, and the last seabirds remaining at their nesting sites are detaching from their colonies.

Yet some of the autumn exuberance is spring-like in character. A few male song birds are still singing territorial proclamations. Many gannets are courting again and copulating. Gannet mating activity tends to increase after the youngster has decided to leave home - trying his or her luck by jumping off a cliff into the North Atlantic with all the adventures, dangers and opportunities that entails.

For the gannets, autumn courting is important in strengthening the mates' life-term monogamous bond. When the pair leaves the colony, the male and female go their separate ways. Their tiny nest-site squeezed in among thousands of tightly packed and highly aggressive blood-letting birds is the cement that ensures their reattachment in the spring. Though they might travel 10,000 kilometers in the non-breeding season, the next

spring they will return to within tens of centimeters of their nest-site and reconnect with their mate.

During late summer and autumn, young inexperienced-in-the-way-of-the-world birds provide extra opportunities for birds of prey and cats, as well as hunters who have disproportionate kills of young birds.

### **Sex and age differences in migratory behavior**

From banding information and more recently from tracking research, we know that some species exhibit sex and age-class differences in their migration strategies. It is a fairly widespread pattern that males tend to remain closer the nesting grounds with females migrating further and young birds going the farthest. These patterns have a number of possible interpretations, such as the male's need to return quickly in spring to re-establish a territory and the young move further away to more hospitable climes.

From Dave Fifield's Masters Thesis research, it does not appear that male gannets migrate farther than females or that they return to the colony sooner in spring. But females do depart earlier in the fall. As part of a research project with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Environmental Management (BOEM), we attached satellite tags to gannets at Cape St. Mary's during the last week September. We can see that the females are moving farther and detaching from the colony sooner. In contrast to gannets, among murrelets the males take the chicks to sea and leave the colonies before females.

### **Differences in fall and spring migration**

Fall migration tends to be a slower more protracted process than spring migration. This suggests that fall migration is motivated by local conditions that vary from year to year and that migratory birds leave the breeding grounds when conditions compel them to move on. Yet in spring, migrants appear to be cued more tightly by increasing, day-length and surging hormones to move more quickly and synchronously to breeding sites. This difference in the rapidity of fall and spring migrations is paradoxical, however. Southward moving birds in fall are assured of better climatic conditions, whereas spring migrants lack such environmental certainty when moving northward.

Some birds moving southward do appear cued by the shortening days of fall. For instance, Osprey tend to depart in September when there are still plenty of trout to be

had. Perhaps the shorter days (longer nights) do not allow them adequate foraging time to ensure daily catches that will sustain them through the night.

Early migrating birds in spring can also get trapped when environmental conditions take a turn for the worse. This is most often most evident among the insectivores such as tree swallows that can be greatly impacted by a late spring or early summer freeze or glitter storm that obliterates their food supply.

### **Environmental change is altering migratory behavior**

For some time now, biologists have been documenting shifts in the timing of avian migration. Many birds are migrating earlier in the spring in association with warming climate conditions.

Yet we contribute even more directly to shifting conditions for bird migration during fall. The proliferation of bird feeders have removed pressures for seed-eating birds like finches and juncos to migrate from temperate and northerly nesting areas. The breeding ranges of many seed-eating birds are extending northward as migratory pressures are relaxed via supplemental feeding.

Our fascination with feeders and with feeding birds have disrupted migration patterns in many species and the wintering ranges of many seed-eating birds and of some ducks and geese have been expanding northward in recent decades. That is, the supplemental food has provided less compelling reasons for the birds to move on. Warming climates also facilitate the northward distributions.

### **Avian residents and winter visitors**

Many of our local birds like chickadees, nuthatches, jays, woodpeckers, crows and ravens stick it out with us through the winter. Some birds like herring gulls and juncos that remain with us showing sliding migration patterns, such that the birds that nest here in summer migrate south while those that nest further north move here for the winter.

As well, many Arctic-nesting species such as Iceland gulls, thick-billed murre, dovekie and snow buntings spend their winter vacations in Newfoundland. The first flocks of snow bunting are arriving on the northeast coast. More are on the way.

### **Birds in the area and around the province**

Tropical storm Leslie moving northward along the US coast pushed flocks of Leach's storm-petrels and jaegers onto the southern coasts of the Avalon Peninsula (Ian Jones). Flocks of petrels were sheltering in the Branch River (Tony Power).

In early October, Juris Benjamin, a sea cadet onboard the support vessel *Trinity Sea* that was tending the Sable Island gas project emailed that an injured gannet had landed on the ship. Juris and other crew were carefully tending to the bird by hydrating it and keeping it warm at night. The bird appeared to be strengthening and will hopefully soon depart the vessel on its own accord.

In a search off Cape St. Mary's, Ian Jones and crew came upon a frenzied feeding flock of about 500 gannets and a hundred or more blue-finned tuna – likely all feasting on mackerel or Atlantic saury. Amazing.

The American Avocet was still in Gull Pond at Cape St. Mary's on 27 September (Todd Hollett). In August, Terrance Hounsell photographed a very interesting all white leucistic black-legged kittiwake in Greenspond. My most unusual sighting in recent weeks was watching double-crested cormorant perched on a float in Burton's Pond being dive-bombed by a sharp-shinned hawk! My most depressing observation was in Musgrave Harbour seeing adolescent boys engaged in the systematic pellet gunning of migrating shorebirds. So we're protecting the environment for the next generation – say what? Optimism is not a solution. I have asked the principal if I can make some presentations in the school.

Keep looking. Contacts = 864-7673 (o), 895-2901 (h), 693-5305 (c)