

The comings and goings of spring

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Tufted Ducks winter in Newfoundland and in spring wing their way back to Icelandic nesting areas. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

As the earth's northern hemisphere leans ever so slightly inward while it spirals and speeds around the sun, the annual cycle of life renews itself. Things change environmentally and things change physically. We experience these changes in the world around us. We see, smell, hear and feel the resonant chords of our natural existence.

For migratory birds with new, strong and crisp plumage, lengthening days hormonally urge and compel them northward to their breeding grounds. Early arrivals, the robins and fox sparrows herald the onset of spring.

Spring conditions on their breeding grounds can be highly variable. Early arriving birds can be compromised on frigid and relatively inhospitable nesting areas. Alternatively climate warming can hasten the onset of spring conditions and lessen opportunities for parents to rear offspring during times of the peak seasonal food abundances.

The matching and mis-matching chronologies of avian migratory schedules and high latitude environmental conditions are a major focus for ornithologists and behavioral ecologists studying climate change and its biological consequences. And indeed as global warming is progressing, more instances of mis-matched bird arrivals and environmental conditions are being documented. Through decades of warming climate many species are exhibiting northerly expansions of their breeding ranges.

The circumstances during spring migration are quite unlike those birds experience during southerly fall migrations. Autumn migrations are triggered by diminishing food supplies and shortening days providing less time to find food and more

time lose energy during longer cooler nights. For a Northern Hemisphere bird migrating south during autumn, there is high certainty that it will encounter milder conditions, longer days and more food.

Yet for the spring migrants moving northward they have no such assurances. What signals could a thick-billed murre use to know about ice conditions that could prevent it from feeding around a high Arctic colony thousands of kilometers further north? Here in Newfoundland we have had numerous instances of tree swallows arriving only to be decimated spring ice storms.

The consequences of warming conditions will be less obvious and more difficult to detect as they tend to occur later in the nesting season. And this is only what we can study on their breeding grounds, most species spend more of the year in non-breeding seasons and areas.

Here's an overview of the comings and goings the major bird groups that breed on the island.

Seabirds

Greater and sooty shearwaters will soon be showing up on the Grand Bank and in coastal waters following Herculean flights from nesting colonies in sub-Antarctic regions in the southern hemisphere. They venture here not to breed but to spend the austral winters pursuing the bounty of the North Atlantic.

The gannets are back from winter ranges along eastern US coast and the Gulf of Mexico. Puffins and storm-petrels are returning from who knows where in the Atlantic to nesting burrows on coastal islands. Common and Arctic terns will soon be here. The black guillemots never left, they just change their plumages with the seasons.

While many are arriving, many seabirds are leaving Newfoundland waters for Arctic breeding sites. Black-headed gulls are headed to Iceland, while Iceland and glaucous gulls are Arctic-oriented. Dovekies are whirring to northwestern Greenland, and thick-billed murres are beating northward to negotiate icy waters around Arctic colonies.

Waterfowl

Many migratory dabbling ducks like black ducks and mallards remain here over winter being provisioned at Quidi Vidi Lake, Bowring Park and elsewhere. Migratory dabblers that arrive during spring include teal and pintails (some overwinter). Among diving ducks, ring-necked ducks, golden-eyes and mergansers return in spring. Overall the autumn, migration is much bigger event, involving many diving ducks migrating here from Arctic nesting grounds. These include eiders, harlequins, long-tailed ducks, tufted ducks and scoters that depart northward during spring. They are all northward journeys.

Birds of prey and owls

Ospreys are obvious raptorial spring arrivals returning from Central and South American and southern US winter ranges. During late summer, they seem to leave relatively quickly – perhaps responding to the decreasing day lengths that curtail

needed foraging time. Many bald eagles move to the south coast of Newfoundland in winter. Rough-legged Hawks return in spring and often show southerly autumn movements along the northern peninsula. Goshawks, sharp-shinned hawks and merlins stay through the winter often harassing the birds at our feeders.

Among the owls, short-eared owls return in spring and during winter depending on the rodent abundances in the Arctic, a few, some or many snowy owls wing south to our island. Many owls including great horned, boreal and hawk owls stay throughout the year.

Shorebirds

Owing to the frigid ocean conditions, spring shorebird migrations tend to be continental affairs. The coastal action is in the fall.

Spring entails the departure of the hardy purple sandpipers from the wet wave-washed and ice-encrusted rocks along the shore. Returning shorebirds include semi-palmated and piping plovers, killdeer, yellowlegs, spotted and least sandpipers, willets and snipe.

Insectivores

The swallows, flycatchers and warblers prey on flying insects **and** can often be compromised by unseasonal conditions. Yellow-rumped warblers and northern waterthrushes are early arriving warblers. They will soon be followed by yellow, magnolia, black-throated green, black-and-white mourning and Wilson's warblers and blackpolls, yellowthroats, ovenbirds and redstarts returning from wintering areas in South and Central America.

Sparrows and finches

Savannah, fox and song sparrow are early spring songsters. Swamp, white-throated and Lincoln's sparrows come in soon after. Crossbills are interesting in that they might nest at almost any time of year. The last remnant flocks of snow bunting are leaving for snow-covered Arctic nesting sites.

Year-round residents

Those species who like most of us do not exhibit extended seasonal migrations are the ones that empty our feeders in the winter. The woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches, crows and starlings do not venture far afield. The most abundant feeder birds are the junco. Yet many of them may be Labrador breeders, whereas many that nest here may winter in the Maritimes and New England.

Yet these birds too have regrown new sets of nuptial feathers, and like us they often radically change their behaviour in spring. Those juncos for example that flocked

in winter are now intolerant of group behavior and are singing their lungs out on individual territories where they mate and invest heavily in the next generation.

Birds in the area and around the province

Keep a look out for the loons and ospreys that have returned to Windsor Lake (Gioia and Janet Montevecchi). Common grackles, likely new birds for PC-SP have visited showed up Carolyn Mayo's and at David Artiss's feeders by Neary's Pond Road. Starting in the Codroy Valley grackles have been radiating across the island in recent years and have arrived on the Avalon.

Gene and Karen Herzberg are leading a spring bird walk in the Gould's on Saturday 16 May at 8 AM. The meeting point is at ... It should be great. I hope to make it.

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