

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Chuck Aid April 24, 2020 :



Gadwall (c) Mick Thompson

Back in 1963, Andy Williams was promoting the idea that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, and we Evergreen Auduboners dearly love our annual Christmas Bird Count – definitely one of the highlights of the year. However, spring migration, for all of us birders in the northern hemisphere is really the bee's knees – THE BEST!

Migration, as you guys know, is that seasonal movement of birds between their breeding and wintering areas, and in the spring as birds are moving north they are already in their sexy breeding plumage which, when you first see them after a nine-month hiatus, can pretty much knock your socks off.



So, why migrate? Of the approximately 650 bird species that breed in North America, 75% are at least partially migratory. We get it, that winter conditions are too harsh for many species – too cold, no insects to eat, etc. But, why do birds living in Margaritaville all winter decide to come north in the spring to breed? The fact is that birds that come north are pretty much guaranteed a higher rate of reproductive success – larger clutches, possibility of laying additional clutches, less nest predation and parasites, abundant food, and longer days for foraging – hence the risks of the journey are worth it.



Mountain Bluebird (c) Mick Thompson

There are a variety of ways in which birds accomplish their trip. Some attempt to make long non-stop flights in order to get past barriers such as the Gulf of Mexico, the Chihuahuan Desert, or the Andes. If bad weather occurs, such as strong winds out of the north coupled with precipitation, these long-distance flights might be curtailed, and the birds hopefully can find a good place to rest and refuel. Here along the Front Range with the mountains acting as an additional barrier, we can get some pretty dramatic “fallouts” of these migrants – fun for us birders. As winds eventually shift again to come out of the south along with better weather, these birds can then continue on their way, and new arrivals from the south can be anticipated – birds have a remarkable ability to find the best flight altitude in order to minimize headwinds and capitalize on tailwinds. As a personal example, after our last major storm on April 16, I went down to Bear Creek Lake Park the following morning and saw over 200 bluebirds (Western and Mountain) and 19 Say’s Phoebes. Two days later on a nice sunny morning I returned to the park and saw no bluebirds and only a couple of Say’s Phoebes.



Western Bluebird (c) Bill Schmoker

Other migratory patterns include movement just during the day (soaring raptors, insectivorous swallows) and nocturnal flights when the air can be less turbulent (warblers, vireos, and thrushes). Locally, we also get elevational migrants that stay in our mountains but withdraw from the highest parts of the breeding range during the winter (Mountain Chickadees and American Dippers).



Finally, how do birds get from A to Z with such incredible accuracy? The list of cues that birds draw upon is pretty phenomenal, though they may not all have the same bag of tricks. Generally speaking, though, birds are able to use the sun's position, polarized sunlight, stars, and the earth's magnetic field to get oriented. They can then navigate more specifically using a variety of visual, auditory, and olfactory cues: coastlines and the sound of the surf, mountain ranges and associated wind patterns, rivers and the sound of rapids, and so forth – eventually even recognizing specific topographic locations.



Cordilleran Flycatcher (c) Bill Schmoker

This time of year, from the end of April into mid-May, is pretty much the peak of all this activity, though some birds have largely moved on or passed through already, e.g. Gadwall, while others won't really show up until the end of May or early June, e.g. Cordilleran Flycatcher. It's a wonderful time to try, as best you can, to track all the changes that really can be occurring almost on a daily basis (this goes for flowers, too). Stay in touch and let us know what you're seeing.