

## The Action of Spring Migration

by Phil Krajewski

Many years ago in early June while fly fishing from “mink rock” down through the deep waters of Pine Creek at Blackwell, I was hitting the ripples perfectly without even a bite to show for my efforts. My friend Joe, bait fishing, had caught and released a dozen various species of fish and shouted in my direction, “Phil, I like the action”. As I looked up at him and momentarily experienced the hallucinatory effect of the tree lined gorge flowing like the creek that I had been staring at for the last two hours, I replied in a Nessmukian way, “I like being on the water.” He laughed in disbelief as he landed another rock bass.

A short while later with darkness creeping into a full walk, we put up our poles, hiked up the steep slope to the car we had snuck up between the railroad tracks and trees, and experienced a sound rarely heard in the canyon anymore: the call of the whip-poor-will. Since the sound was fairly close we walked with eager anticipation and were soon standing within a few yards of the real ‘catch of the day’ -- a whip-poor-will on its singing post. Not bothered by our proximity it continued with its part of the symphony made by other whip-poor-wills echoing up and down the canyon. So close was our position that I noticed a clicking sound preceding the “WHIP-puwiw-WEEW” call.

Birdwatching is a lot like fly fishing for most of the year with the satisfaction of being in the woods, or on the water, or over the field more a source of contentment than the identification of birds. However, in spring migration all disciplines collide in an action-packed, sight-and-sound, one-month period in which birders land the big one.

Spring migration is almost a rite of passage for all birders: if missed it is a cause for frustration and a year of lamentation. Some of the qualities which make spring migration rise like a prairie falcon with respect to birdwatching are:

1. Although there is some overlap before and after, the period from late April to late May is teeming with birds of diverse species. Waterbirds actually start moving through at ice out, followed by early migrant landbirds, such as the American pipit, or the territory-grabbing red-winged blackbird. Soon most habitats become saturated with birds -- with wood warblers dominating the movement -- on their way to more northerly breeding grounds.

2. The weather is pleasant and generally cool. Although it can be somewhat unsettled, stifling heat and bitter cold is usually not the case during this period of high activity.

3. Deciduous trees and shrubs have not leafed out fully. You are able to follow the flight of small warblers from branch to branch and easily focus your binoculars on their brilliant bodies. If you have trouble initially finding the bird in your field of view, you can pick out a branching frame of reference and follow it up, down, or over to the bird. Be aware of the ‘critical second’ in which a bird may move as the binoculars are being swept into position. It is important to hit ‘the spot’ immediately so if the bird has flown away you can reposition your quest. Needless to say a leafless tree makes this determination much easier.

4. No bugs!! I am reminded of a Jamaican saying, “Mosquitoes keep mankind moving”. If this is true, then black flies keep all species of life moving very quickly. I have had some horrific experiences with black flies, especially in the Maritime Provinces, including a lengthy backwoods experience in Labrador. Cool mornings and evenings during spring migration tend to be mosquito free, and black flies, numerous depending on weather variables, prefer hot sunny afternoons. Since the best birding occurs before 10am and after 6pm, the lack of bugs is a real plus for birdwatchers.

Well, let’s go birding!! As I put my hat on my head on this cold spring morning and get set for a birding feast, I am reminded how envious I am of all the other creatures on Earth that don’t dress up to face the elements. My bright red shirt and blue jeans will fit right in with the warblers who only had to drop some feathers to be ‘clothed’ in their stunning breeding plumage. I compromise my simplicity further by grabbing a pair of gloves.

Wow!, what luck. I open the door to the cherTEE cherTEE sound of an ovenbird as a black-and-white warbler gleans insects from the same red pine bark that so many white-breasted nuthatches perused during the winter months. My flow of attention descends out of the trees and onto the ground and understory with the movement of a hermit thrush. Its intermittently bobbing chestnut tail is clearly visible. This shy bird, bolder in the early morning or late evening, seems to always stay one step ahead of a good sighting. A screech owl tape played a few years back brought out not only mobbing chickadees looking to isolate the intruder, but an emboldened hermit thrush amazingly close (2 feet), curiously turning its head trying to determine what was happening. Screech owl tapes are permitted and work well, but other tapes of bird songs should be used with extreme caution. A male bird song may cause the real male to leave the area thus creating a breeding vacuum for that particular territory.

Suddenly the sound for which so many years I thought was a seagull in the woods, QUEEah, is now heard and identified as a pair of yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Although my initial plan was to go over the field to the tree line and try to find the brown thrasher responsible for the daily cacophony of imitations, I am quickly drawn further into the woods by intense activity in the upper branches just ahead. It is a group of ruby-crowned kinglets hovering and flicking about and eating caterpillars. The insect/bird/food continuum is in full view and right on time. All is well with the world.

Just then a black-throated green warbler jumps into view.... Ah, the action and contentment of spring migration. Now is the time, go birding, and try it for yourself. Good Luck!

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