

Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

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Northern Shrike by Nancy Halliday

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF MIGRATION

by Eleonora di Liscia

At a time when birders look forward to an embarrassment of riches, the Chicago-area 2013 spring migration was, well, a bit underwhelming.

And according to Doug Stotz, Senior Conservation Ecologist at the Field Museum, 2012 was "as bad a migration as I have ever seen."

So, what makes for a mediocre migration versus one that we birders remember ecstatically? A lot of it has to do with weather patterns. And yes, climate change.

"Spring is a tough time to be a bird because you are very dependent on what the weather is doing, because the weather is creating the resources you depend on," said Stotz. "In the fall, it's easier because you are taking advantage of the resources that developed during the summer, and so, if you get a warm spell or a cold spell those resources don't go up or down."

The 2012 and 2013 migrations represented "the ying and yang of climate change," said Stotz. In 2012, spring was too early and in 2013, it was too late.

Because the arctic is rapidly warming, the jet stream that affects climate becomes less constant in its flow, creating more of a loop. In 2012, this loop brought hot air through the Midwest, but it brought cooler Canadian air to the Pacific Northwest. This year, the west is getting the record hot temperatures while we got the colder spring.

The hot 2012 spring caused trees to leaf out in March, well ahead of the main thrust of migration. Trees such as oaks rely on certain chemicals like tannins to protect their leaves against insects. But these chemicals are missing when the leaves first come out. Many insects are adapted to emerge before these tannins are produced.

"The birds are taking advantage of that big resource. When you get it out of cycle, the birds don't respond well. If you leaf out in March, that big flush of insects is over by the time migrants like warblers, vireos and flycatchers arrive in early May," explained Stotz.

Some 2012 species did arrive early, but they tended to be species such as Fox Sparrow that arrive in March from the southern United States.

"These are not the species that arrive in May, because they are in South and Central America and have no way of knowing that the eastern United States is under a historic warming spell," said Stotz.



Red-breasted Merganser Photo by Tim Wallace

Stotz cited one study of Purple Martins which showed that the Martins left their wintering grounds in South America for migration and arrived on breeding grounds at the same time, regardless of weather.

Although the 2012 migration started on time with a good late April/early May, the temperature rose to summer highs causing migration to stop abruptly. The lack of insect resources meant the birds had to keep going past us.

In 2013, the spring was late. While Stotz said he observed a good diversity of species, there weren't big numbers of each species, and there was still a mismatch in the timing between the migration and the leafing out.

"Being a migrant bird in the upper Midwest, you're always playing this game. Seems like every year, I write my report for the Meadowlark on spring and say 'This year was a weird spring.' The birds have to deal with fluctuating weather year to year between winter and spring," said Stotz.

Some years, such as spring, 2007, March may be warm, but April will be cold, which is why birds cannot migrate based on weather. As a result, birds time their arrival based on averages.

"The problem was these last two years have been pretty far off in opposite directions," said Stotz.

Climate change may also be affecting the number of great fall-out days, Stotz speculated. Fall-outs are associated with frontal movement—cold fronts coming after a period of southerly flow

continued on pg. 2

UPS AND DOWNS OF MIGRATION CONTINUED FROM COVER

or southerly flow coming after a cold front. Stotz said he is always looking for that push out of the southwest when the birds will come in, but this year Chicago never really got that weather pattern.

Weather patterns in the south can also affect what we see in Chicago. Storm systems may keep birds from moving. This spring, the many storms south of Chicago interfered with movement into our area.

For an ideal migration, Stotz likes to see an April that is no warmer than average so that the trees do not leaf out until the first week of May. Stotz looks to the oak trees to get a feel for the timing of how the leaf-out is going relative to the timing of the birds.

How the migration we see here relates to the overall population health of birds is an open question. Migration is extremely variable and complicated.

"Unfortunately, the way we see migration is not a very good proxy for what the birds are doing. In a good migration, a lot of birds are going to pass right by us. It's hard to get a feel for it," said Stotz. "That's part of why breeding bird surveys are so crucial, because during the breeding season, things are more consistent. If they are successful nesting even though migration was bad, that's all right."



Doug Stotz

ORINTHOLOGY ROBIN STYLE

by Eleonora di Liscia

I was happily scouting my backyard one fall day when I came across the tiniest little notebook by my back kitchen window. I opened it and with the help of a magnifier was able to decipher some script. Thanks to my superior knowledge of bird languages, I could immediately see it had been written in Thrush, most probably American Robin.

The notebook appeared to be some sort of observation diary. The entries went back several days. I read:

"May 19: Uniquely to humans, it appears that the offspring actually feed the adults. I have observed female immature preparing food on several occasions which was then consumed by entire family unit."

"May 20: Raucous calls coming from interior of home. It appears that female and male adults are engaging in some sort of territorial dispute with immature. Most agitated behavior appeared to come from adult female."

"May 22: Immature female again observed preparing food. Interestingly, on this occasion, adult female also engaged in food preparation. Several adults were later seen inside home at flat topped service, presumably a table, engaged in communal dining. It appears that humans will share food when food is abundant. Perhaps this is a form of dominance display—subject humans are providing food to demonstrate their superior food gathering skills."

After reading the entries and thinking about the dates, I was shocked. My daughter often made us dinner. On May 20th, we did have a mild family dispute. I believe I may have been the source of those "raucous calls." And on May 22nd, we'd had dinner guests. My daughter and I had both cooked. Why the Robin appeared to be observing MY household!

Just then I heard a rather annoyed whinny. I looked up. It was the feathered researcher himself.

"I'd like my notebook back please," he said, not unreasonably.

"This is yours? Why are you watching us? What is this for?" I queried.

"If you must know, it's for my thesis. I was making field observations to support my theory that humans are inferior to birds at parenting."

"Thesis? Field observations? About us? Where in the world do you go to school?"

"Cornell," he sniffed.

"Naturally," I replied. "That just figures. Look, I hate to burst your theory but my daughter actually likes to cook. We let her do it because it makes her happy, not because we are inferior parents."

The Robin began scribbling hastily.

"What are you writing!" I demanded.

"Nothing to concern you," he muttered. Then I heard him mumble to himself: "When presented with evidence of poor parenting, adult female resorted to distraction behavior, i.e. vocal attempts at misleading observer."

"I am not lying!" I practically shouted.

"Lying? That's what you call it. Very interesting. Must make a note. . ." And with that he flew off, leaving his humiliated subject behind.



American Robin Photo by Richard Paulson

A TRIBUTE TO JOHN BUCKLES, John Buckles, ENSBC member, husband of Betsy Buckles, and friend of ENSBC travelers to Belize (several times), and Trinidad/Togago, passed away in late July. John had a wonderfully wry, dry sense of humor and added his wisdom and wit to all the field trips and birds we saw in those avian-rich locations. *We will miss him!* — Libby Hill

THE BEEKEEPER OF SKOKIE

By Eleonora di Liscia

Theo Shaw Watanabe fell in love with bees. And it's a love she's willing to fight for.

The Skokie resident had completed her garden, when she started reading about bees. That's when she fell in love.

"It seemed like a natural extension of my gardening. My garden was pretty much finished, and the bees are so in trouble. Pollinators of all sorts are in trouble, but honeybees are quantifiable because they are kept by man. In the U.S., over the last seven years, we have lost an average of 30.5% of honeybees every year! That is unsustainable. Honeybees not only pollinate our crops, but also our home vegetable gardens and fruit trees, and help produce seeds and fruit to support wildlife. I read a dozen books on beekeeping, and the more I read, the more fascinated I became," Theo said.

So she contacted Skokie's Health Department, and they confirmed that Skokie had no laws against beekeeping. Theo spent last winter building her hives and studying her vocation. She ordered natural-sized bees rather than the oversized bees raised by commercial beekeepers.

On May 11, the bees arrived. Four days later, the doorbell rang. Skokie Animal Control told Theo she had one week to remove the bees. While the bees are not presently illegal, they said, Skokie was revising its livestock ordinance to prohibit beekeeping because the village considered bees to be an attractive nuisance.

A visit to Theo's yard shows that the bees are anything but. The wooden box making up her hive stands behind her fenced and locked backyard. While there is a hub of bee activity near the hive, the hive faces a fence forcing exiting bees to fly up and away from the neighbors. From outside Theo's yard, you would hardly know anything was there.

Theo immediately contacted the assistant village manager, who allowed her to keep the bees until the law might be changed. Since then, she has worked tirelessly to prevent the ordinance's

passage by meeting with village officials, offering tours of her yard, enlisting organizations such as the Evanston Beekeepers, rallying neighbors and speaking at Skokie village board of trustee meetings.

Theo proposes the more sensible alternative is to regulate beekeeping rather than outlaw it. Beekeeping is legal in Glencoe, Northfield, Winnetka, Chicago and Evanston among other communities.

The Evanston ordinance licenses beekeepers. Hives must be enclosed by secure fencing with a locked gate and prominent signage. No materials such as bee combs that might encourage robbing, may be left at the apiary site. If the hive becomes aggressive, the beekeeper must replace the queen with gentler stock. There are additional rules on the density of bee colonies.

While the bee ban has not yet come to a vote, Theo's efforts appear to be making some headway. Village officials may consider regulating bees. Even so, Theo warns that regulations could be so strict as to effectively outlaw bees or only permit a public beekeeping site that could lead to other problems such as spreading of disease or parasites between different people's hives. Theo is advocating regulated, backyard beekeeping.

Theo's beekeeping is not just a passion, but a mission. Theo believes

the hobby beekeeper could save the genetic diversity of honey bees.

"We have lost 90% of the genetic diversity of honey bees in the last ten years. We're getting to critical mass really soon where it's fix it or forget it," Theo said. "It's up to the hobby beekeeper to keep genetic diversity alive. We need to breed survivors so we'll still have bees in ten years."

Those who want to help can encourage Skokie residents to email the mayor and trustees in support of regulated backyard beekeeping and watch the village agenda to attend any meeting where the beekeeping ordinance will come up. Theo also posts a blog about her beekeeping efforts at <http://www.beegardener.blogspot.com>. She can be contacted at bees@infosquid.com.



Theo Shaw Watanabe and her bee hive.

Photo by Eleonora di Liscia

NOTES

If you are not receiving our enews and wish to do so, please contact Suzanne Checchia at smcchecchia@aol.com. Suzanne keeps members up to date on events, field trips and other breaking news.

ENSBC Club Members receive Helen Hull Award
On May 25, 2013, the National Garden Clubs, Inc. awarded Charlotte Adelman and her co-author and husband, Bernard L. Schwartz, The Helen Hull Award

for the Year 2012 for LITERARY HORTICULTURAL INTEREST for their book, *The Midwestern Native Garden - Native Alternatives to Nonnative Flowers and Plants, An Illustrated Guide* (Ohio University Press 2011).

PROGRAM NIGHTS

All programs are held on the fourth Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd., Evanston, IL. Free admission, parking and refreshments. For more details on programs, check our website at www.ensbc.org.

September 24, 2013: "Urban Wildlife Study: Coyotes and other Mammals." Chris Anchor, Wildlife Biologist with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, will speak on the return of keystone predators including timber wolf, cougar and black bear in Northern Illinois with special emphasis on the Cook County Urban Coyote Project, the longest coyote project of its kind.

October 22, 2013: "Hummingbirds" For the past 15 years, Michael and Kathi Rock have dedicated their lives to learning about and attracting these "glittering fragments of the rainbow." They will cover ideal habitat, migration, nesting, feeding, importance of water features, and how the elements of the best hummingbird feeders and plants can bring you up close to these special birds.

FIELD TRIPS

SEPTEMBER 7, 2013 – SATURDAY

Chicago Botanic Garden. Expect fall passerine migrants, particularly warblers vireos and thrushes, plus anything else we can find. Meet 7:00 a.m. at Starbucks on 243 N Skokie Blvd just south of Lake Cook Rd, east side of Skokie Blvd near Nordstrom & Marshalls, to carpool with Botanic Garden members. Leader: David Johnson

SEPTEMBER 22, 2013 – SUNDAY - NEW TRIP!

Paul Douglas Woods "Mixed Bag." Look for early waterfowl, late shorebirds, possible rails and bitterns in the marsh, lingering nesters and migrants in the grasslands, and fall warblers in the shrubs and wooded areas. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at the Grassy Ridge parking lot, Central Rd. west of Roselle Rd. From the east, take I-90 to Roselle north exit, west on Central. Leader: John Elliott

SEPTEMBER 28 AND OCTOBER 5, 2013 – SATURDAYS

Northwestern University Campus. The NU campus has long been a stopover for migrants of all kinds headed south. Park on the lakeside of the upper deck of the south parking lot off of Sheridan Rd. and Clark St., north of Clark St. beach, at 8:30 a.m. Leaders: Sept. 28 Libby Hill and Jason Weckstein. Oct. 5 Libby Hill and Wayne Svoboda.

OCTOBER 13, 2013 – SUNDAY

Hawkwatch, Illinois Beach State Park. Meet at 8:30 a.m. at the Nature Center parking lot, South Unit near the Park Lodge. Target species will be migrant hawks. If winds are unfavorable we'll turn our attention elsewhere in the Park for migrating landbirds. RSVP with Leader: David B Johnson at djohnsoda@comcast.net or 224-567-9650.

CONSERVATION COLUMN:
A WIN FOR BIRDS
IN CHICAGO

By Lloyd Davidson

As any of you who have driven recently along South Lakeshore Drive (between 31st and 47th streets) know, the unsightly strip of weedy-brushy lake-fill-derived land that separates the west side of the highway from the railroad tracks that lay 100 feet or more farther away is in the process of being largely cleared and denuded by bull dozers and other such equipment. This is a project that started last March and is part of a Chicago Park District's long term plan to convert this area into a healthy bird conservation area, one they hope will provide rest and nourishment for any migrating birds that land there after crossing Lake Michigan each spring. The first step in this transformation has been to remove the invasive plant species like European Buckthorn, Cottonwood and Box Elders that have currently taken residence there and replace them mostly with various species of oaks and, perhaps, hickories.

This area is 2.2 miles long and contains about 41.5 acres of land, much of it filled with soil that isn't of very good quality due to its contamination by salt runoff from highway de-icing and by oil and other contaminants from the trains that pass by but oaks are fairly hardy and they should be able to survive in such an environment. If they do, it is hoped that they will attract hundreds of species of native insects whose caterpillars, in turn, will provide food for the 5 million or more individual birds, comprised of about 300 separate species, that migrate through this area every year.

One major component of this plan involves recruiting enough volunteers in August of this year, 2013, on a date not yet set that I know of, at least as I write this, to plant 125,000 tree seedlings in a single day. Whether such a crowd will actually materialize is not yet known but members of the ENSBC should be on the lookout for this call and volunteer if they can. I certainly plan on doing so.

This should provide an exceptional haven both for migrating birds and for bird watchers and I strongly applaud the Park Districts foresight and efforts in launching this important project.

As long as something like the goldspotted oak borers that have recently invaded California oaks don't show up here, this project looks like it might be a great success story.

Sources: Chris Bentley, WBEZ and Lori Rotenberg, Grist.org



Wood duck Photo by Tim Wallace'