

FINGER LAKES BIRDLIFE: Spring migration in full swing

By CHARLIE ROUSE | Posted: Sunday, April 27, 2014 5:00 am

It's that time of year bird watchers have waited for since last spring — the annual migration and influx of songbirds that will delight us for the next few months.

In the earlier months, waterfowl were the main event. Presently, hawks are moving through as their migration peaks during their journey north. But now it's time for songbirds to put on their show.

The varieties of birds that will be passing through over the next few weeks encompass more than 100 species. Arguably, top billing of all the songbirds goes to the warblers, but all of the migrants are a thrill to find and equally pleasant to the ear. In addition to the 30 species of warblers that pass through, other songbirds will include: vireos, orioles, grosbeaks, flycatchers, thrushes, wrens, swallows, swifts, cuckoos, sparrows and tanagers. In addition, marsh birds will include: rails, bitterns, herons and many species of shorebirds.

The migration period is very fleeting, only a few short weeks. If you don't get out and see them during May, those that nest in the far northern regions will — for the most part — be gone until next year's passage.

Virtually all of the migrants, except for the sparrow clan, are insect eaters (or insectivores). For much of the year they are either moving north or south in migration or wintering in the tropics of Central and South America and the Caribbean. But in March, the lengthening of the days stimulates hormones in their brains that tell them "it's time to go." As temperatures warm, food availability permits them to advance northward. Cumulatively, the migrants number in the millions; consequently, massive amounts of insects, both flying and crawling, must be available to sustain their incessant appetites.

Generally, the birds migrate by night, while feeding and resting during the day. Weather conditions, too, play a role in their advance. They routinely ride warm high pressure fronts, advancing a couple hundred miles at a time. A stalled cold front will briefly hold them in place until conditions improve. Then it's off again to the next stop, or wherever they may find themselves at sunrise. There are several notable hot spots where migrant songbirds reliably gather in remarkable numbers. Some of the most famous migrant traps are: the southern tip of New Jersey (Cape May), Point Pelee, Ontario and Magee



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Marsh near Sandusky, Ohio. However, one the best places is right here at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. With more than 50,000 acres of woodlands, marsh lands and grasslands, the birding can be excellent. Or, even more locally, the Ontario Pathways Phelps Trail, off Route 96, has been one of the best places to spend a couple of hours birding. At some of these locations in mid-May, birders congregate by the thousands to witness the spectacle of these little jewels of the avian world.

Some may wonder how a beginner starts to identify birds. Typically, during migration, the birds he sees are moving so fast through the foliage or across the sky he seldom gets a good view. When the bird does pause for a second, the beginner is often frustrated in attempting to compare what he sees before him to the field guide drawings. He starts flipping frantically through the guide, looking at the bird, looking at the pages. The bird disappears, a new one comes into view and the page flipping begins again.

By contrast, the knowledgeable birdwatcher walks two steps into the field and identifies a dozen species in as many seconds, calling them out as fast as he can pronounce their names. The beginner stands in awe, dumfounded.

Our beginner comes to wonder whether he lacks some special talent or is hindered by inferior eyesight or hearing. Many people become so disappointed that they give up and thereby miss out on a lifetime of enjoyment. Patience and practice are important to improving your identification skills.

A great way to sharpen your skills would be to learn to identify the common birds that come to your yard throughout the year. This practice will be a good learning process for when the big spring rush gets underway. Also, consider joining the local bird club on one of its field trips to begin learning the finer points of identification. You will find it challenging, but very enjoyable. Soon you will be on your way to becoming a more confident birdwatcher.

Rouse, of Geneva, is a past president and secretary of the Eaton Birding Society and his column appears monthly in the Finger Lakes Times. For a free checklist of the birds seen regularly in our four-county area, or to send your comments, questions and unusual sightings, email him at flbirdlife@yahoo.com.