

GREEN SCENE

The Marvels of Bird Migration

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Male lazuli buntings, with their blue heads and red breasts, are one of the most colourful birds to be found at Colony Farm Park at this time of year. H. Maguire photo.

Every spring, I am delighted to awaken to the sweet sounds of bird songs through my open window. Even before dawn, birds such as robins, finches and black-headed grosbeaks call for mates to advertise they have found the perfect spot to build a nest. This is such a special time of year that I anticipate its arrival weeks in advance and am always disappointed when this fleeting period of a melodious dawn chorus draws to an end.

Resident birds which live here year-round such as Steller's jays, spotted towhees or robins may have already raised their first clutch of eggs and could be getting ready to raise a second set of young. In some years, many of these birds will successfully raise two sets of offspring. Birds that more typically eat berries throughout the rest of the year usually turn to catching nutrient-rich insects to feed to their offspring. In years when spring weather is cold and damp, the insects these birds rely on catching to feed their young will be far less abundant – this can lead to nesting failures. So far, this spring appears to be a good-weather one with a promising abundance of insects.

Some bird species are just arriving at their summer territories and are now searching for mates. In early April, male rufous hummingbirds appeared in our yard and dazzled us with their flashy red-throated displays. Recently, the rufous females arrived; they are also making frequent visits to our hummingbird feeder. Some of these females may already be sitting on two eggs in tiny nests they construct of spider webs and lichens. In the hummingbird family, female-only parenting is the norm. Once the males have mated, they lose all interest in family life and, by early July, will begin their journey south back to their winter habitat in the southern USA and Mexico.

On May 9, we celebrated International Migratory Bird Day at Colony Farm Regional Park by offering birding walks to members of the public. At that time, a number of migratory bird species were putting in their first seasonal appearance at the park where they will stay for the summer to nest and raise their young. These birds include cedar waxwings, yellow warblers, common yellowthroat warblers, orange-crowned warblers, kingbirds, several species of swallows, black-headed grosbeaks and lazuli buntings. Other birds, such as the western tanager or MacGillivray's warblers rely on the excellent habitat at Colony Farm Park only as a temporary stopover to rest and re-fuel on their way to nesting habitat elsewhere.

Some species of birds such as the Swainson's thrush, undertake extremely long migrations from forested areas in Argentina to as far north as the boreal forests of Canada. These birds, which can be reliably heard (but often not seen) in nearby forests throughout the summer months, face many challenges during migrations which can be 7000 km or more. Studies have shown that most songbirds fly at night and use the daytime hours to rest and feed. A single night of exhausting flight can cause them to lose up to 6% of their body weight. Such weight loss leaves them unable to continue with migration until they have fed and regained their weight. Depending on flight conditions, birds fly an average of about 200-300 km each night. Some longer and more challenging flights can also be required along the way – especially if they must cross the Gulf of Mexico as many songbirds do. Overall, it can take them 3 or more weeks to complete their journey. Each day, they face the challenge of finding sufficient food to be able to continue their flight the next evening.

Songbirds are thought to take a bearing on the polarized light of the setting sun each night as they head north. If a bird such as a Swainson's thrush becomes accustomed to regular stopovers in forests along their migration corridor, consider what a challenge it could be for them to discover a relied-upon patch of forest has been cleared for human development or converted to crop land and treated with poisonous pesticides. It is, perhaps, not surprising that many species of migratory songbirds have undergone worrying declines in populations over the past few decades as critical re-fueling spots along their migration corridors disappear.

There are a number of things you can do to ensure migratory birds will continue to delight us every spring. Drinking bird-friendly shade-grown organic coffee will ensure these birds have safe food-rich tropical forests during our winter months. Purchasing pesticide-free organic food products will help to reduce the use of pesticides which could harm birds when they eat pesticide-laden insects or feed them to their young. Avoiding pesticide use in your yard, planting berry-producing native shrubs and providing a clean source of

water in a “bird bath” offers birds good habitat over the summer months. Keeping a cat, if you have one, indoors will make your yard a safer place especially for young and inexperienced birds that have just left the nest. Purchasing recycled paper products helps to ensure more forests will remain as valuable bird habitat. Finally, supporting the establishment of protected areas for bird habitat will guarantee that birds will always be able to find safe places to rear their young, that our skies will be forever filled with their beautiful colours and our spring mornings will always be enriched by their songs.

On Saturday June 6 at 9 am and 3 pm, members of the Colony Farm Park Association will offer 2 hour birding walks to members of the public who wish to enjoy the beautiful migratory birds at Colony Farm Regional Park. The walks will depart from the large parking lot next to the Community Gardens at the end of Colony Farm Road. Access to the Park is from the Lougheed Highway at the Colony Farm Road intersection in Coquitlam. The walks are offered free of charge; registration is not necessary. Please bring binoculars if you have them and wear comfortable walking shoes.