

Heading South

Tens of millions of migrant birds are on the move in Ontario

By: Gregor Beck

While cottagers are busy packing up their lakeside retreats and local residents are battening down the hatches, Ontario's songbirds are also making plans in anticipation of winter. Throughout the fall, some of the province's most numerous and familiar bird species are making stealthy exits amid the falling leaves of autumn.

Fall migration is even larger than spring migration since it includes not only adult birds, but also the tens of millions of their young. Despite the high numbers moving south, though, we miss much of the spectacle as the migrants fly mostly under cover of night.

"Most people don't realize how many birds are actually on the move this time of year," said Jon McCracken, director of national programs with Bird Studies Canada. "Many of Ontario's most common songbirds migrate at night and can only be seen during the day when they're feeding or resting."

Nevertheless, cottage country residents have excellent opportunities to witness this impressive wildlife spectacle. Just about any location with some natural habitat – forest, wetland, meadow, yard – has the potential to be a magnet for migration-weary and hungry birds. If there is water nearby or trees or shrubs with berries, then the chances of attracting songbirds is even greater.

While many birds migrate south in late August and September, some of central Ontario's iconic bird species, from loons to kinglets to sparrows, migrate through cottage country in October and even November.

"Many of the species we see this time of year breed in Ontario's vast boreal forest," said Caroline Schultz, executive director of Ontario Nature. "This highlights the importance of protecting natural habitats close to home and across a species' range."

According to the new Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario (www.birdsontario.org) the white-throated sparrow has an Ontario population of about 12 million birds, exceeded in number by only the Nashville warbler at 15 million. The grey and white dark-eyed junco, the diminutive golden-crowned kinglet, and the hardy yellow-rumped warbler all have provincial populations of about 12 million birds also. This means that later fall birdwatching can bring big rewards in terms of the numbers of birds seen.

Fortunately, not all birds migrate at night. Large flocks of blue jays, blackbirds, crows and robins can be seen throughout the day as they wing southward. Flocks of common

loons and waterfowl congregate on lakes and rivers prior to migrating. Under favourable weather patterns, birds of prey, including sharp-shinned and red-tailed hawks, merlins, and bald eagles, soar overhead in cottage country as they follow shorelines, river valleys and ridges.

The magnitude of these annual migrations highlights the importance of Ontario's diverse habitats to birds of all types -- the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario confirms that about 300 species nest in Ontario.

Unfortunately, not all cottage country species are faring well and many formerly common birds are in sharp decline. The purple martin, a member of the swallow family, has declined by 46 percent in Ontario over the last two decades. Similarly, the whip-poor-will has suffered a 56 percent reduction in its cottage country range in just 20 years.

Throughout the fall months, millions upon millions of birds are migrating south. The variation in migration patterns is good news for birders and nature enthusiasts since it means the prime birding season can be extended pretty much until snow fall. Not unlike the cottage season itself.

Gregor Beck is a wildlife biologist and co-editor of the new "Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario" (www.birdsontario.org)

Ontario Nature is a not-for profit that works to protect and restore natural habitats through research, education and conservation. It connects thousands of individuals and communities with nature through various conservation groups across the province (charitable registration # 10737 8952 RR0001). For more information, visit www.ontarionature.org.