



Our World Connections

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In recent years, our world has been ever-expanding its technological breakthroughs. Remembering back just eleven years ago, I did a research paper in high school, of which my research could include only one source from the internet. The rest had to be “looked up” using books (ah!) and microfiche (micro-what?). Now, with the click of a mouse, volumes of information from all points of the globe can be in front of me in seconds. Cell phones are in most everybody’s pockets, keeping them connected to anyone or anywhere in the world. These ever-changing technologies give Crawford County a connectedness to the world. However, we have more subtle connections in our own backyards and back-forties. Neotropical migratory birds, some traveling several thousand miles one way, will soon be calling Crawford County home.

The Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) is a handsome bird, with a bluish back and yellow throat and breast. Flying in from Central and South America in mid to late April, male parulas tend to select territories in riparian areas or woodland swamps. These areas foster growth of moss and lichen, which the female is inclined to use in nest construction. Since the Northern Parula is a treetop specialist, where it forages for insects, it can be hard to spot. Its treetop habits and diminutive size of 4.5 inches are superseded by its powerful song. Their song is a strong buzzy rattle that ascends up the scale and ends with a sharp *zip* (zeeeeeeee-zip). Once learned, their distinctive song will give away their presence. As our smallest warbler, the Northern Parula’s yearly journey connects the tropics to Crawford County, proving that our habitats are suitable for biodiversity.

Walking through a woods on a spring morning can yield a myriad of birds, but a flash of red and incessant raspy song lets one know they have wandered into the territory of a Scarlet Tanager. Scarlet Tanagers (*Piranga olivacea*) make an incredible journey of up to 7,000 miles to call Crawford County home. With its vibrant red body and jet black wings and tail, it is hard to confuse the male Scarlet Tanager with any other bird. The female, with her drab yellow-green body, blends in perfectly with the forest canopy, camouflaging her well while sitting on a nest. As she scours the forest for nesting materials, the male follows, or he may perch in mid-canopy nearby proclaiming his mate and territory. The song is likened to that of a “hoarse robin” and can be sung constantly through the day as males set up territories in late April. Scarlet Tanagers are hastened to their winter grounds by Crawford County’s lack of insects in the cold months. Yet, with each return of spring, tanagers help keep central Ohio connected to the world.

Of the 180 birds that have been documented to nest in Ohio, at least one-third comes to us from South and Central America to breed. Some of these migrants have been increasing their numbers, while others unfortunately have been declining. Specific reasons for these declines are assumed, but the fact remains that habitat loss is the number one killer of any animal. Whether it is reversion of a woods to field (or vice-versa), or fragmentation of habitats through development, these migrants need places to call home both here and abroad and all points in between. Since the rain forests are not in our backyards, it is easy to dismiss the loss of habitat that happens in Bolivia, Panama, Louisiana, or Florida. Not only should we make sure habitats are available here in Crawford County, but we should also be wary of our actions that might affect their wintering grounds and stop-over habitats as they work their way northward.

Both the Northern Parula and Scarlet Tanager can be seen and heard in Lowe-Volk Park and Sears Woods, far from their winter home in the tropics. Take a hike through these trails, either self-guided or on one of the park district’s bird programs. Are these the only places in the county to have these two species? Highly unlikely. They could be nesting in your back-forty, or the woodlot next to your house, or the woods you drive by every day on your way to work. Whether it is a forest, overgrown fence row, brushy field, or any of the other habitat types, neotropical migrants need us to provide them with suitable breeding habitats this spring and the next.

