

Birds in Migration

It's a risky thing for them to do!

By Warren Uxley

Everyone is well aware of the massive influx of birds into our area each spring. Our woodlands, fields and backyards are suddenly filled with birdsong. What most people do not realize is that this colossal movement north requires a herculean effort and that sometimes a terrible price is paid.

Why migrate at all? Why not stay in the tropics? The fact is that tropical environments are full of things like arboreal snakes, botflies, monkeys and other hungry creatures and pathogens that love to consume baby birds. Many tropical bird species are doing well if they have a 15 percent nesting success rate. By comparison, the northern temperate and arctic environments are relatively predator free. And, there is the brief but tremendous flush of new food that is available as a result of the greater day length in the more northern habitats. Nest success rates in the north are a least 35 percent and can be as high as 80 percent. So, the incentive to migrate is very real.

If only it were that simple! A bird flying across the Gulf of Mexico expends enormous amounts of energy. Many birds are only half way to their destination when they hit the Gulf coast. Continuing north they must find food to keep going and deal with the increased exposure to predators that results from flying through unfamiliar terrain. A bird is more likely to die during migration than at any other time in its life. Even in good years many birds succumb while trying to reach their breeding grounds.

BUT, not all years are good! In fact, there are years when something terrible happens and 2010 was such a year. Black Swamp Bird Observatory has been operating bird-banding stations on Lake Erie for many years and according to Research Director Mark Shieldcastle "This year was a little scary. We were down 40% from average and 50% from last year." He goes on to say that every station east of the Mississippi River reported similar declines.

Some of the numbers are frightening. Here are just a few statistics. All are departures from the average. The numbers verses last year are even worse.

Myrtle Warbler - 66%	Black-throated Green Warbler – 78%
Black-throated Blue Warbler – 62%	Palm Warbler – 61%
Tennessee Warbler – 50%	Red-eyed Vireo – 70%
Black and White Warbler – 51%	Indigo Bunting – 50%

More than 15 species had declines of 50% or more and many more had declines in the 30 to 50 percent range. The transgulf migrants suffered the worst; "Gulf Coast stations reported major decreases," said Shieldcastle. Many of those species that come up the Mexican coast had average numbers.

Perhaps the species that suffered the most was the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Many banding stations do not band Hummers and the numbers that do come in are not always indicative of trends. However, Hummingbird feeders are very popular and the vast majority of people throughout the eastern U. S. report massive reductions in the number of Hummers visiting their feeders. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are transgulf migrants.

So what happened?! The short answer is that nobody knows. Let's hope that the same thing doesn't happen again next year.