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LIVING

A spring pilgrimage

Walking along Rondeau Provincial Park's South Point Trail during the birding doldrums of mid-afternoon, you would have thought all of the birds had mysteriously vanished. Hardly a warbler or vireo was to be seen. In the bright sunshine and heat, the number of species singing, too, included far fewer voices, reduced to mostly orioles, blackbirds and wrens.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

However, we knew from experience that the birds had to be somewhere. It was just a matter of finding them. Hearing a few unfamiliar call notes emanating from a tangle of vines and shrubs, I decided to try pishing — making a loud, series of “psh-psh-psh” sounds — to see if the unidentified bird would

show itself. Within seconds a beautiful male Wilson's warbler came out and landed on a low branch.

Hopeful that other birds would be there, too, I continued pishing for several minutes. As if drawn to an acoustic magnet, an entire parade of species flew in to investigate the curious sounds: red-eyed, warbling and Philadelphia vireo, Baltimore oriole, house wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, least flycatcher, American goldfinch, common grackle, chipping sparrow, yellow warbler, magnolia warbler, blackburnian warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, and common yellowthroat. When everything was said and done, 15 different varieties of birds had come over to see what all the commotion was about. It was interesting to watch their behaviour, too. They would constantly feed as they came in closer, grabbing a caterpillar from a leaf or sallying out for a hapless midge.

Once again this year, we had chosen Victoria Day weekend to make our annual pilgrimage to the southern Ontario birding meccas of Rondeau Provincial Park and Point Pelee National Park. These two wooded peninsulas which jut out into Lake Erie concentrate thousands of migrant birds in the spring, tired and hungry after their long flight from Ohio over the lake. On a good day in May, 100 or more different species enliven the woods and thickets. So, for anyone who gets a charge out of running up a big total of birds in a single day or trip, Rondeau and Pelee are the places to be.

Arriving in Blenheim on the Friday night, we decided to drive over to the Rondeau park entrance to listen for any voices of the night that might be calling. Before we even rolled down the car windows, the peenting call of an American woodcock was easily heard against the background noise of spring peepers and grey treefrogs. The bird then launched itself into the air, its wings quivering as it gained altitude. Soon, we could see its silhouette against the pale pink light of the darkening western sky, an image of spring nights that I never grow tired of seeing.

As much as I try not to focus on listing — that is, being primarily concerned with how many birds you see on a given day or in a certain location — I still can't quite get away from the goal of seeing at least 100 species during a spring's day of birding. So, in order to jump start the day's list, and not have to worry about looking for common birds later in the day, I decided to spend a few minutes the next morning listening to the backyard birds of our bed and breakfast. It wasn't long before I'd either seen or heard 24 species, everything from house sparrows to killdeers.

Once in the park, it was soon evident by the mix of species present and the high percentage of female birds that we had arrived pretty much at the tail end of the migration. Typically, birds such as the willow, alder and olive-sided flycatcher, Canada warbler, Wilson's warbler, mourning warbler and cedar waxwing are among the last to arrive in the spring. When I start hearing the high-pitched calls of waxwings, I know that spring is quickly giving way to summer.

Rondeau Provincial and Point Pelee National parks attract thousands of migrant birds in the spring, tired and hungry after their long flight from Ohio over the lake



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Karl Egressey, special to The Examiner

Clockwise, from top left: Wild columbine carpets large areas of the forest floor at Rondeau Provincial Park in May; Rondeau is well-known for its Carolinian species such as the tulip tree; the Wilson's warbler; and a sign proclaiming Point Pelee as the southern tip of Canada.

Although tallying a big list of different species is exciting, great views of rare or hard-to-see birds are even more satisfying. This year, a number of different species proved to be especially co-operative. These included a pair of grey-cheeked thrushes, a species which can be quite difficult to identify. We watched them for at least five minutes as they searched for food and gently sang among wild columbine flowers, only metres in front of us. Memorable, too, was an olive-sided flycatcher showing off its dark vest on the flanks and white puffs of the lower back as it sat on a conspicuous dead branch just above our heads. However, our most satisfying views were of a male parula warbler sitting at eye level in some shrubs less than two metres away. Thanks also to the superb light, we could see all of the obscure field marks such as the broken eye ring, multicoloured necklace on the upper breast and the obscure pink patch of feathers on the flanks — markings that you can usually appreciate only in a field guide.

For many observers, spring birding at

Rondeau and Point Pelee is also about sound. By focusing your attention on bird song, you get an almost instantaneous picture of the diversity of species around you as well as the number of individual birds. This particular weekend, the dominant voices were Baltimore orioles, catbirds, yellow warblers, red-winged blackbirds, common grackles, barn and tree swallows, warbling and red-eyed vireos, and house wrens. Not quite as common, but calling at least every couple of minutes, were least flycatchers, eastern wood-pewees, eastern towhees, great crested flycatchers, red-bellied woodpeckers and Carolina wrens. Coaxing your brain to push these more common sounds into the background, you could then listen for anything different.

Many voices were absent, too, the birds having probably already passed through. The flute-like call of the wood thrush, the “tcher” of the ovenbird were both conspicuous by their absence. Had we been there a week earlier, both of these species would probably have been quite common.

By day's end, we had managed to find about 95 different kinds of birds. A quick trip to a local sewage lagoon which harboured lingering ducks and shorebirds helped to shore up the list.

However, when we weren't focusing on the birds or plants, it was hard not to notice something rather peculiar about the birders themselves. There were practically no young people — as in under 40. In fact, the vast majority were 50 years of age or older. About the only exception were some groups of Quebecers where people in their 20s and 30s were fairly well represented. Because birders, and naturalists in general, are usually committed conservationists who represent a strong voice for the protection of species and wild spaces, one cannot help but wonder what the relative lack of younger people means for the future.

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