

## March

It is sometimes difficult to realize that two thirds of March is still winter. When the month begins, the trees are still bare. Fields are still brown and by and large empty of visible life. Except for the absence of snow, everything looks pretty much as it did in January and February. Ice often appears each morning at the edges of ponds and on the shallow water that lies in ditches. There may even be a snowstorm early in March. But the snow rarely lasts more than two or three days before it melts. The days are noticeably longer. The sun is noticeably brighter. Spring is in the air! It just has not come yet.

In spite of appearances, things are beginning to change as March begins. And the pace of change is speeding up. By April, it will all look very different indeed.

Birders are pulled in two directions by March. Listers realize that wintering birds will soon depart. If the year list still lacks Lapland Longspur, or Prairie Falcon or Long-eared Owl or Red-breasted Nuthatch, the lister had better make a trip north to get them before they leave. Pulling against that need is an urge to go south to fatten the growing list with new species suddenly appearing from that direction – like the first Eastern Phoebe, the first Turkey Vulture and the first Field Sparrow. Other birders just venture forth to see what birds have left and which are arriving. If just observing seasonal change is the objective, March can be a most rewarding month to be out and about.

Apart from those lingering winter rarities that the lister still needs, there are only a few birds which can be seen most advantageously in Missouri in March. I have probably seen Golden Eagle and Prairie Falcon in Missouri more times in late February or early March than at any other time of year. For that reason, I usually plan my early March trips to include some open country. Smith's and Lapland Longspurs also move in early March, another reason to put open country on the day's itinerary. March is perhaps the best month to listen for migrating Sandhill Cranes, although they are uncommon enough in Missouri so that it does not make much sense to go out looking for them in any particular location, unless they have already been reported there. March is a good month to look for Rusty and Brewer's Blackbirds, Fox Sparrows and Winter Wrens. It is a time when scoters and Long-tailed Ducks sometimes show up on their way north – although in much smaller numbers than when they were southbound in November. Almost any irruptive migrant, like a siskin or a crossbill or a Red-breasted Nuthatch, may show up in Missouri again on its return trip.

A lot of breeding birds arrive in March and set up territories. American Robins, Northern Cardinals, Northern Mockingbirds and House Finches are already singing loudly in the neighborhood. Horned Larks begin to appear in pairs along the roadside. Red-winged Blackbirds still show up in dense flocks, but there are now single males displaying in the cattails or from the tops of bushes along roadside ditches. Killdeer suddenly appear on bare fields along with a much larger contingent of Eastern Meadowlarks. Red-shouldered Hawks are conspicuous in their areal courtship. Chickadees, Carolina Wrens and Titmice call everywhere in woodland habitats. Woodpeckers drum there by day. Owls are noisy there at night.

Many birders make special pilgrimages in March to Greater Prairie Chicken leks in early morning and to American Woodcock display areas at dusk. Both of these species continue their displays into April, but they become difficult to find after that. If Pine Warblers do not breed nearby, the latter part of March is a good time to make a special trip to find them. They are the earliest breeding warbler. Their singing while the deciduous trees are still bare announces spring in a special way.

A lot of waterfowl move in March. Most of the Snow Geese come through then, as do diving ducks like scaup, Ring-necked Ducks, Canvasbacks and Redheads. March is perhaps the best month to see White-fronted Geese in Missouri. The arrival of the first Blue-winged Teal and Wood Ducks are important events for those who keep track of the progress of spring.

By the end of March, fields that were brown at the beginning are green. Many trees show a lot of green, too. From a distance, it appears that they are covered with budding leaves. In fact what appear to be leaflets are small green flowers. Frogs peep in wet places. Brown Thrashers and Eastern Towhees sing from treetops. The earlier shore birds – i.e. Wilson's Snipe, yellowlegs, Least, Pectoral and Baird's Sandpipers, American Golden Plovers – peck and probe on mudflats. The first Blue-gray Gnatcatchers flit among the budding branches.

It's spring, at last!

**Bob Fisher**