

## April

The first days of April fulfill most of the unsatisfied expectations of March. The last days of April begin to confirm the full promise of May. A lot of migration takes place in between. Indeed, Spring migration peaks in our state for many species. Although May is our busiest spring migration month, many species have already gone through by the time May starts.

Birders usually are well into the FOY (first of the year) game by the time April begins. The first Eastern Phoebe, the first Tree Swallow and the first American Golden Plover usually showed up in March, along with singing Pine Warblers, peenting American Woodcocks and booming Greater Prairie Chickens. Now a whole lot more firsts start to appear. Southern birders begin to report first Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Yellow-throated Warblers, Louisiana Water thrushes and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds while birders in the far north of the state are seeing their first Purple Martins, Brown Thrashers, Field Sparrows and Eastern Towhees. Wherever one is, every trip afield is almost guaranteed to produce a half dozen or more FOY's to fatten up the year list.

The FOY game should not obscure the fact that April is the best month to see certain spring migrants, as well as the last month to see some of the others. Ducks go through in big numbers during the first half of April. If you are going to see a Cinnamon Teal, or a super rare duck like a Garganey or a Eurasian Wigeon, April is probably the most likely month for it. The largest variety, and probably the largest numbers of Sparrows also go through in April. April is the best month to get a northbound LeConte's Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow or Henslow's Sparrow. Harris, White-crowned, White-throated and Lincoln's Sparrows are usually still moving in the first week of May, but they are all much more easily seen in April. Of the migrant sparrows, only Nelson's Sharp-tailed usually waits until May.

April is the best time to see pipits, both American and Sprague's, as they move north, along with Winter Wrens, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Hermit Thrushes and Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks. The chances of seeing any of these species go down sharply by the end of the month. If you don't have Smith's Longspur, Rusty Blackbird and Brewer's Blackbird by the end of April, you will probably have to wait until November for your next chance to get them.

April is an important month for migrating marsh birds, like American Bittern, Virginia Rail and Sora. When you consider that April is good for ducks, shore birds, marsh birds and wetland sparrows, it is wise to include wetlands in nearly every April trip. Mid-April is prime time to look for the very elusive Yellow Rail, which is found in wet meadows rather than in cattail marsh.

Several factors determine when a species will arrive to nest or come through to nest farther north. Ducks and geese have to wait until the lakes, ponds, marshes and prairie potholes in which they breed are free of ice. Insect-eating birds have to wait until insects they like to eat are available. Some migrants, like many shore birds and boreal nesting warblers, need a proliferation of prey species at key spots along their migration routes so that they can refuel and fatten up for the remainder of their journey. April is a month in which these conditions are changing rapidly, both in our state and to the north of us. Species like Snow Goose, Common Merganser, American Goldeneye and Bufflehead are down to a few stragglers by early April. By the end of the month,

most of the waterfowl, and passerines, like Tree Sparrow, that breed well to the north of us, have pulled out.

By mid-April, many trees have bloomed and are beginning to leaf out. The greatest proliferation of insect larvae is reserved for May, when the leaf out is more advanced and when the breeding habitat of boreal species is beginning to open up. Nevertheless, Ruby-crowned Kinglet numbers usually peak right in the middle of April, and Yellow-rumped Warbler numbers are highest during April's last week.

By late April, Northern Parulas, Prothonotary Warblers, Orange-crowned Warblers and a small vanguard of other warblers and vireos have arrived. Shore bird numbers and variety are on the verge of peaking early May. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, eastern Kingbirds and the first Dickcissels are on the wires. Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-wills-widows are singing at night. The first Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are heard in the woods.

The rush is on!

**Bob Fisher**