

June

June is a let down for many birders. That is a shame because June is a lovely month to be out of doors. Nature is at her best then. Foliage is new and fresh and lush, not yet tunneled by leaf miners or speckled by insect holes or dried and made brittle by summer heat. Birds are proclaiming their territories in song, building nests, carrying food to their young. Trees and bushes that flowered in April or May are sending down seeds or developing fruit. Prairie grasses are tall and scattered with flowers. Marshes grown up with dark green reeds and rushes bustle with activity. Long months of preparation are coming to fruition. The natural processes that steadily built up from the low rumble of January to May's crescendo now stage a grand finale of fulfillment in June.

Despite all that is going on, many birders take June off. Except for a few late stragglers, the migration is over. A trip to the woods yields nothing new. The lakes are busy with boaters, and there are no migrant birds there anyway. Perhaps it is time to do that yard work or put in the garden, which the birding activities of May delayed.

The most ardent birders never stop birding. They see June as an opportunity to plug holes in the year list by picking up species they missed earlier. Some go north to get up Bobolink or Upland Sandpiper or Least Bittern. Others go west for Western Kingbird, Western Meadowlark, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher or Yellow-headed Blackbird. June is a good month to go south to Greer Crossing or to Roaring River State Park to pick up southern species like Hooded, Worm-eating and Yellow-throated Warblers, Painted Bunting, Black Vulture, and perhaps even a Greater Road Runner. Sometimes the missing species is of a kind found in small numbers in a specialized habitat close to home – perhaps a Blue Grosbeak, Henslow's Sparrow, Mississippi Kite or Bewick's Wren. Maybe only one or two of its kind have been reported breeding in the state – a King Rail in an eastern marsh or Black-necked Stilts in the boot heel, for example. Perhaps it is just a matter of going to the right place at sundown to hear Whip-poor-will and/or Chuck-wills-widow. Ardent listers need these birds, and they go for them in June.

June is also the month when some of the most interesting birding science is done. Some birders run breeding bird survey (BBS) routes for the United States Geological Survey. Starting out at the crack of dawn, the birder drives a pre-determined route and makes regular three-minute stops, noting every bird seen or heard. Multiplied by thousands of sample routes throughout the United States and compared from year to year, BBS data yield a lot of valuable information about bird population trends.

Many Missouri birders participated in the Missouri Breeding Bird Atlas until its completion. Atlasers visited three-mile square blocks and noted evidence of breeding activity for every species in the block. Just seeing or hearing a species in the block was evidence of "possible" nesting activity. Hearing a male sing on territory on successive trips or seeing a pair was evidence that breeding was "probable." Finding a nest or seeing a bird carry food to or a fecal sac from a nest or observing newly fledged young "confirmed" nesting. June was a prime atlasing month.

The atlas project has been completed, but similar surveys are still going on, particularly at wildlife refuges and conservation areas. They constantly want information about bird activity in their areas. June provides many opportunities for birders to volunteer, if they wish to do it.

If you are not a lister with species gaps to fill in June, and don't want to get up early enough to participate in a BBS or local survey, let me propose another reason to bird in June. Use June to get out and look at the whole picture. See what birds are around, but also learn to identify the trees and the flowers. Be on the lookout for snakes and pay attention to swimming muskrats. Take time to watch how birds behave and how they interrelate with the environment in which they live. Learn which species specialize in which habitats. Become an ecologist. Birding can open the door to an appreciation of all of natural history. If you want to open that door, or open it wider than you have before, there is no better month than June to do it.

Bob Fisher