

## September

September should be one of our most active birding months. The fall warbler, vireo and flycatcher migrations hit their peaks in September. The shorebird migration, which has been underway since early July, tapers off rapidly during this month. It may be your last chance to get Black-bellied Plover, Avocet, Western Sandpiper, Sanderling, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope or some other shore bird you did not get earlier. Most of the Broad-winged Hawk migration occurs in later in the month. Audubon Society of Missouri also holds its annual fall meeting near the end of the month. Its field trips always produce an impressive array of fall migrants.

Several factors make September a different birding experience from its spring counterpart, May. Passerine (song bird) migrants are not singing. The trees are fully leafed out, and the birds are difficult to see. Many come south in drab fall plumage, which makes them more difficult to identify. If May is an introductory course in how to bird, September is at a more advanced level. But there are compensations. Several times as many individuals of a species come south as went north. Not only do most of the adults return. Their offspring follow. Some species (e.g. Canada Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided Flycatchers, Common and Caspian Terns) seem much easier to get in fall than in spring. September is the month in which Sabine's Gull usually shows up, if at all.

I make judicious use of a Screech Owl tape to get song birds into sight in September. There is no concern then that it may disturb nesting birds. I try to follow FISHER'S RULE. "Don't play the tape until you see a bird." As in spring, but even more so in September, song birds travel in loose feeding flocks. If no bird is visible, the feeding flock is probably elsewhere. If I see a bird, a feeding flock may be nearby. If I can find such a flock, the tape will often keep them in my vicinity. Sometimes it will draw them in.

Why do song birds come to a Screech Owl tape? Mobbing a predator is an innate defense mechanism that has enabled many species to survive. Screech Owls are a threat to small, woodland birds, so they mob what they think is a Screech Owl when they hear its call. Mobbing not only immobilizes the predator. It also warns of its presence. Hole-nesting birds like Chickadees, Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, Eastern Bluebirds and woodpeckers are especially responsive to a Screech Owl tape. If you can get some of them to gather, their scolding often brings in warblers, vireos and flycatchers. It can take as long as ten minutes for a Screech Owl tape to draw in most surrounding species. The tape rarely works for grassland species.

I try to locate the tape where I can see gathering birds. Screech Owl tapes usually do not work as well in open country or in a forest of tall trees as they do in edge habitat or in woods with under story in which the mobbing birds can gather. They work best earlier in the day. They usually work poorly in early afternoon or when it is windy. Sometime they work poorly in gloomy, depressing weather. Screech Owls have two calls, a descending "whinny" call and a "tremor" call on a single pitch. Most Screech Owl tapes feature a whinny, followed by a tremor, followed by a whinny, followed by a tremor, etc. I have one that features only the tremor call. I think it works best.

The transition from summer to fall occurs in September, and it is often quite noticeable in the bird species one sees at the beginning and at the end of the month. Early September is often hot. It is an excellent time to see Empidonax flycatchers. By late September, many of the flycatchers have moved on, and sparrows, thrushes and tanagers begin to show up in numbers. Weather makes a big difference in September. Cold fronts from the northwest bring waves of new migrants. The whole process seems to slow down when periods of hot, still weather occur.

Altogether, September is one of our most interesting birding months. Enjoy!

**Bob Fisher**