

## July

In a sense, July is an analogue of January. Then the days were beginning to get longer, and a few birds were beginning to move north. Now they are beginning to get shorter, and some southward migration begins. These initial movements are small in comparison to the stampedes of May and September. But they are a beginning.

Although analogous to one another, there is a major difference between the northward and southward bird migrations. In military terms, it is the difference between tactics and strategy. Northward migrants seek tactical advantage in reproduction. Southward migrants pursue a grand strategy of long-term survival. The northward migrant that reaches the breeding ground first may get the best territory and with it the tactical advantage of possession. The southbound migrant's task is to survive the migration, make it through the winter and live to go north the following year. Spring migration is a race to be first to reach a destination alive. Fall migration can be more leisurely. But it is also a life and death matter. Many more individuals of a species – both adults and young of the year – come south than will go north the following spring.

Birders who get out in early July find much nesting still in full swing. At first glance, there is little evidence of fall migration. Most local breeders are still singing. Newly fledged young are everywhere. Nature is still in the prime of a luxuriant summer life. Early July is still a good time to go for species missed earlier – a Least Bittern perhaps, or a Common Moorhen. It is also still a good time to look at the larger picture. Learn the flowers and trees. Look for the details, which show how the season progresses.

A more careful look discloses that there is considerable movement of birds even in early July. Birds not only go south after breeding. Some move in other directions for a while. These are called “dispersal migrants.” Among the most obvious dispersal migrants are swallows, many of whom complete nesting by the end of June and gather in flocks. The swallows, which line the phone wires may be local birds, or they may have come from farther away. Kansas' first Cave Swallow appeared at Cheyenne Bottoms in mid-July, 2001. I saw the second there two weeks later. Missouri's first Cave Swallow will probably be recorded by someone who takes the trouble to scan dispersant flocks of Cliff Swallows in July.

Other conspicuous dispersal migrants include herons, egrets and other waders, many of whom wander north in July and August. Missouri's next White Ibis or Tri-colored Heron may well show up in July. Fulvous Whistling Ducks are another dispersal migrant. They appear regularly in southeastern Missouri rice fields in July. Terns often appear on large lakes then. July is also a good month to expect a Laughing Gull to show up somewhere in the state.

The most obvious southbound migrants in July are shorebirds. They begin to appear as early as Independence Day. Solitary Sandpipers usually show up first, flying up from a small pond edge or drainage ditch. By mid-July, Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers, Spotted Sandpipers, Semi-palmated Plovers and various peeps, especially Least and Pectoral Sandpipers, appear in increasing numbers in suitable habitat. Conventional wisdom has it that these more northerly breeders are adults who left the breeding grounds early because their nesting attempts failed. That probably is true of arctic and sub-arctic species, who could not be expected to commence

nesting before early June. But some of the more southerly breeding species may actually have completed nesting. For example, much of the Upland Sandpiper migration takes place in July. These are birds who have completed their breeding assignment. They have a long way to go to their wintering grounds on the Argentine Pampas, so they are on their way.

If a really rare shorebird, like a Curlew Sandpiper or one of the Eurasian stints, appears in Missouri, it will probably show up during the latter half of July. Some of the less common shore birds, like Marbled Godwit, Black-bellied Plover and Red Knot, are also possible then. Good shorebird habitat is well worth visiting in late July.

By the end of July, most bird song has been replaced by the monotonous chirps and buzzes of insects. Newly fledged birds have gathered in flocks, staging for migration later on. Some, like Purple Martins, will be on their way soon. Others, like grackles and blackbirds, will hang around until cold weather. It is hot, and the air is still. It seems as though little is happening. But there is a restlessness about the way those flocks move around. Biological clocks are ticking. The fall migration is under way.

**Bob Fisher**