

August

The first two weeks of August are so much like the last two weeks of July that it is hard to treat August as something new and different. Summer is still in full swing. The days are still bright and long and usually hot as well. Nesting continues to wind down. There are fledged young birds everywhere, and parent birds are still feeding them. Everything seems to have settled into a routine.

Don't be fooled by appearances. Nature never settles into a routine where the seasons change. Something is always happening, even if it is not dramatic. Early August is a time of disappearances. Bird song has been tapering off gradually for a month. Suddenly it is gone, replaced by the monotonous buzzing and chirping of insects. Except for a few late breeders like American Goldfinches and Sedge Wrens, nesting completes. Barn Swallows no longer fly in and out of the barn. The Cliff Swallows that behaved like bees around the bridge are absent. The Martin house is empty. Territorial activity ends as nesting completes. The American Robins, House Finches and Northern Cardinals that enlivened the neighborhood since March or early April are now silent. Male Dickcissels and Indigo Buntings that sang from the phone wires in rural areas are no longer there.

Bird migration continues to change in early August, but many of the changes are nearly imperceptible. Many adult song birds are now on the move. Birds of the year will follow in September. Birders do not notice the migrant song birds in August because they are not looking for them then. Many factors discourage woodland birding in late summer. Southbound migrants do not sing, so it is difficult to know if they are present. The vegetation so thick that it hard to spot them visually. They days are still long. It hardly makes sense to drive to a woodland spot and take a walk because the hot hours when bird activity diminishes occur relatively early in the morning.

Most birders focus their attention on marshes and mud flats in August. Good shorebird habitat can be hard to find then because vegetation rapidly covers any exposed mud. But there is usually some of it somewhere. If it exists, it is worth visiting because it probably provides the birder with his best opportunity to find new bird species for the year. Shorebird habitat often exists near marshes, so birders go to waterfowl refuges and wildlife management areas and hope to find an impoundment that has recently been drawn down or a flooded area that has recently dried out. Waders, terns and American White Pelicans continue to accumulate in such areas. Now is the time when fledged young Common Moorhens and Virginia Rails are most apt to appear out in the open by the cattails. Now and then, while looking for shore and marsh birds in a management area, the birder may notice a Northern Water thrush walking along a dike, a Black-billed Cuckoo or Empidonax Flycatcher in a bush, or an Olive-sided Flycatcher on a snag. Then he remembers that song bird migration is also underway.

Birders make special efforts to see hummingbirds and Buff-breasted Sandpipers in August. Hummingbird watching is a passive activity. The birder sits and watches one or more hummingbird feeders, usually in his own or someone else's yard. Hummingbird activity increases exponentially in August. First the males, then the females and young start to move. There usually are more hummingbirds visiting a feeder than might be seemed. I once sat in my

yard and examined the hummingbirds that came to my feeder so carefully with binoculars that I could tell individuals apart. I had thought that only two or three hummers were visiting my feeders regularly. In fact, ten different individuals visited my yard in a single day!

Some hummingbird feeders attract dozens of hummingbirds, which consume pounds of sugar each week. The odds of seeing anything but a Ruby-throated Hummingbird at a particular Missouri feeder in August are quite low, but Rufous Hummingbirds are now annual in Missouri. Anna's Hummingbird, Calliope Hummingbird and Green Violet-ear have also been recorded here. There are Kansas records of Magnificent Hummingbird, Allen's Hummingbird and Costa's Hummingbird within fifty miles of the Missouri line, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds have been recorded further east. Many Missouri records of Rufous Hummingbirds and other rare species are from months other than August. Perhaps those species are most apt to stray after the Ruby-throat migration diminishes. I believe it is more likely that they show up with the Ruby-throats but get noticed only after the Ruby-throats leave. I would like to see more careful attention to hummingbird feeders in August. Get yourself a tall glass of iced tea or lemonade, take it and your binoculars out to the back yard, settle into a lawn chair and enjoy watching hummingbirds come and go. If enough birders will do that, I predict that the number of rare hummers discovered in Missouri in August will rise.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are another August specialty. Although I have seen them in seven different states on the east coast, their principal migration route in our latitude is through Kansas and western Missouri. Sod farms are the best place to look for them. But they can also be found by careful searches of the drier margins of playas, ponds and lakes and occasionally in farm fields that have been disked. Sod farms also produce migrant Upland Sandpipers and, occasionally, American Golden-plovers, so it is good to look them over regularly in August.

There is enough song bird migration by the end of August so that it pays to make special efforts to find them then. They are still difficult to find on hot, still days when high pressure depresses movement. Expect them after a cool front has moved through from the northwest. Late August is a good time to use an Eastern Screech-owl tape to draw them in. It cannot disturb nesting activity then. Using a screech owl tape and covering a variety of habitats, I have seen as many as fifteen different warbler species in Missouri on a single late August day. Such days may also provide the year's best opportunity to get a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and/or a Philadelphia Vireo.

There is something about finding warblers and flycatchers on a cool late August day that evokes wistful emotions. Another summer is ending. The storms, frosts and snows of fall and winter lie ahead. Those seasonal changes would be disastrous for insect-eating birds, so they are hurrying south to avoid them. Birds that seemingly sang joyously during spring and early summer now communicate to one another only with soft, businesslike chips. Some of the year's best birding still lies ahead, but it is sad to note that the birds that sang in spring are leaving in ever increasing numbers and to think that one day soon most of them will be gone.

Bob Fisher