

October

Just as the September migration was not exactly the reverse of May, so October is not exactly the reverse of April. It is true that many species that went north in April now return south in October. But there are important differences between the spring and fall migrations.

In spring, birds instinctively leave their wintering areas and move north to compete for the best nesting territories and nesting sites. Generally, the earliest birds to arrive on the nesting grounds have a competitive advantage over later arrivals. Therefore, migrant species have genetic internal alarm clocks that stimulate them to move as the days lengthen. One might think the individual whose wake-up call gets him off earliest always has an inherent advantage over rivals who get going later. Unfortunately, it is not so simple. A bird that arrives too early may starve because the breeding grounds are still so cold that the ice has not yet thawed or insect prey species are not yet available. When a bird dies, it loses all opportunity to pass on its genes. Therefore, evolution has adjusted the internal alarm clocks of spring migrants carefully to coincide with thawing out and greening up in the north. Since thawing and greening occur relatively rapidly, the trip north is usually more rushed than is the return trip south.

Although some species do stake out winter territories, the emphasis in fall is not so much upon getting there at the earliest practicable moment as it is upon getting there in one piece. Maximizing an individual's chance to get to the wintering grounds alive usually involves balancing the need to fatten up for the journey with the need to be gone from the north before autumn changes exhaust food supplies. The bird who lingers in the north while food supplies last, yet gets away before they suddenly disappear, has the advantage. To some extent, fall migrants can adjust to changing conditions as they find them. Thus, some fall migrants migrate south only when frosts or freeze-ups stimulate them to move. Birders often note a coincidence between bird migration and northwestern cold fronts. Suddenly, some birds disappear. Others appear to take their places.

Insectivorous birds had best be on their way before the frosts of October suddenly wipe out the supply of insect food. Birders still see warblers, vireos and flycatchers during early October, but by the latter half of the month most of them are gone. Eastern Phoebes and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are usually the last flycatchers to go. Yellow-rumped Warblers are usually the last warblers to disappear because they feed on Poison Ivy and other berries in fall. By the end of the month, most of them are gone, too, although a few may linger through the winter.

Certain insectivorous birds find insects hiding in tree bark or under leaves when other insects are no longer available. Brown Creepers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Winter Wrens and Red-breasted Nuthatches are among the so called "half hardy" species that occur after other insect eaters leave. They usually appear first in October.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds usually disappear by mid-September, but if you leave the feeder up, you may get a rare one in October, or even later. Most records of Rufous Hummingbird (and of birds that cannot be distinguished between Rufous and Allen's) show up after the Ruby-throats have left.

Shore birds and terns often have very long distances to travel between their breeding and wintering areas. They need to put on a lot of fat to fuel their long distance flights. Therefore, the fall shore bird migration is quite protracted, occupying much of July, August and September. By October, it is pretty well over. A few yellowlegs, peeps, Dunlin and Wilson's Snipe still hang around, and the odd Avocet, Black-bellied Plover or American Golden-plover may still show up. Red Phalarope is probably the only shore bird that shows up more frequently in October than in any other month. When they do appear, and that is very infrequently, Red Phalaropes usually show up swimming on large lakes or sewage lagoons.

The largest numbers of thrushes and Sparrows come through in October. Thrushes take advantage of berries like those of Poison Ivy and Rough-leaved Dogwood. Sparrows feed on abundant seeds. October is probably the best time of year to look for grassland sparrows like Le Conte's and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. The usual technique for finding a Le Conte's is to walk a swale of moist grass until one flushes, note where it lands and put it up again. After being flushed two or three times, a Le Conte's Sparrow will often tire and land in a bush, permitting close observation. Some birders also have success swishing them up.

I believe that Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is a much more common migrant through Missouri than most people realize. They are under-reported because birders do not expect them and do not know how to find them. They like heavy grass near water, from which they can sometimes be swished up. Sometimes, it is also possible to flush them while walking wet prairie.

They display a yellowish rump when they flush. However, they are easily confused with both Grasshopper and Le Conte's Sparrows unless one has a lot of experience with them. I predict that Missouri birders will find this species increasingly more often as we gain experience.

One bird that shows up in October, but is difficult to find at any other time of year, is Sprague's Pipit. They appear in large fields of relatively sparse short grass, the same habitat that yields Smith's Longspurs a month later. The usual way to find one is to walk the field and flush it. They give a characteristic "squeet" call as they flush. Their usual behavior is to "tower" when flushed – i.e. rise high up in the air. The best way to see one on the ground is to wait until it descends, then approach the spot where it lands. With care and tenacity, it is often possible to approach a Sprague's Pipit quite closely and to see it well.

Ducks, grebes and hawks also migrate in October. Although November is a better month for scoters and other more rare ducks, grebes and loons, some appear in October. October is also the month when the largest numbers of White Pelicans, Franklin's Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants come through,

Altogether, October is a great month to bird. The weather is comfortable. There is plenty of migration. And the chance to discover a rarity is always there.

Enjoy!

Bob Fisher