

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

EARLY SPRING MIGRATION

By Clive E. Goodwin

Back in the heady days when I was new to Canada Jim Baillie used to write a regular birding column for the Toronto *Telegram*, now long gone. I think just about every spring he would have an article on spring arrivals, where he listed the average arrival dates of the more common early spring migrants. Eager for anything which would help me birding in my new home, I would devour these pieces enthusiastically, noting the dates and watching for every new arrival with eager anticipation.

Well, I still watch for new arrivals with eager anticipation – I suspect every birder does, new or old. Our winters are long, and the return of the first migrants is something to be savoured with delight. But it never occurred to me to wonder about those dates – until I was faced with doing something similar myself, only to realize it was far from straightforward! How did he arrive at them? Because, whatever the swallows at Capistrano are supposed to do, bird arrivals in our part of the world are far from predictable, or uniform, and are complicated by wintering birds, weather, and a host of other variables. It's February 7 as I write this, but yesterday I looked out the window and saw my first Ring-necked Duck. They're not really supposed to be here until March, but at Presqu'ile I gather people have been spotting the odd Ring-necked for some weeks now. But using the date of the first Presqu'ile bird could be misleading, as indeed would February 6 – it's not there now, and it may well be March before I see any more.

This subject was touched on last spring in the article about warblers, and then I used the date after which the database had at least one bird recorded on every subsequent day. However, even that can be misleading, as the database is huge and a record of one warbler a day with 100+ years of records doesn't certainly mean you could expect to see one on that date. In any case, birds that arrive in May don't have quite the same cachet as ones that first appear in March, after 8 or more weeks of snow, and their patterns of arrival differ. So I'm going to look at the arrivals of some of the more familiar early spring birds, taking some of these variables into account.

I referred to wintering birds above, and most of the birds I'm going to mention [apart from a couple of May arrivers] do winter regularly here, sometimes in good numbers. Look at a species that comes back really early – Horned Lark is our best example – and it becomes impossible to determine from the records which birds were wintering and which were newly arrived, although in the course of any particular year one can usually have at least some idea.

This is because migration and weather are inextricably linked, particularly early in the season when poor weather can be expected and is particularly threatening to the birds. Migrants are stimulated to move in periods of pleasant, warmer weather. As our weather is cyclic, such periods alternate with more stormy, often colder conditions, and this may cause birds to move back – reverse migration – or to be 'grounded' until things improve

again. Experienced birders know this, and often make a particular effort to be out when groundings might occur. One of the most dramatic movements I have ever seen was on March 11, 1992, when we had over 20,000 starlings urgently flying west along the lake in a heavy snowstorm, accompanied by hundreds of robins and Horned Larks. The next day dawned clear and cold, and there were huge flocks of robins on every berry-bearing bush, and flocks of Song Sparrows all along the road edges looking for food on the cleared shoulders. Those birds had all arrived previously, and if they had followed the usual pattern they would have appeared during a push of warm air into the area.

Returning to our Horned Larks, we have had good numbers in January, but many more in February, with high counts interspersed with smaller numbers, doubtless reflecting the vagaries in the weather. By March the higher numbers drop off as birds continue north, or disperse across the countryside to start nesting. Clearly, the larks arrive in February, but it's not clear just when. By contrast, with the March migrants numbers tend to drop off in February, presumably as wintering birds either move further south as food becomes scarce, or as they succumb to the severe weather. For the later March migrants we may have no winter records at all.

It's the March arrivals that make the news. Even non-birders celebrate the first robin – well, the first they happen to notice, anyway. And often [perhaps more often than not] the date of that robin is noteworthy, as it marks the first time robins generally are back, running over lawns, sitting in tree-tops, maybe even singing a little. They may well be the same birds that were down in the valley feeding on buckthorns, but now they're back – home. Typically that date is one of the warmest of the early season, causing the wintering and early migrant flocks to break up and disperse. So, what date did Jim Baillie use for his arrival for robins? It turns out it was March 18, but I have no idea whether that was earlier than the general arrival date or not. Let's see whether the database can shed any light on the matter.

We find that robins in particular reveal a very even increase through most of the month of March [from about the 10th], and that is true whether we look at the total number of reports for a given date, or the total number of birds reported. The first time we encounter more than 10 reports for a day is on the 7th, with 12. We then reach 23 on the 14th, 33 on the 26th, and on the 31st there have been 38 reports. When we look at numbers of birds we find that 129 were already recorded on the 1st [maybe on the buckthorns in the valley], but by the 11th there were 784 and on the 26th fully 1048 were seen. Given the size of the database [which tends to yield high numbers regularly because so many years are being summarized] I'd say a pretty good average general arrival date would be March 26 for Northumberland. Interestingly, Toronto tends to run about a week ahead of us because it's further south.

Other March migrants follow a similar pattern, although the increases are less even and come more in a series of steps. I've summarized the figures for some of the most familiar March migrants below, with some extending into early April, as well as a couple of May migrants for comparison. Note that the May birds reach their peak numbers by around mid-month. In fact, they decline sharply after that, as their migration ends. Both the

Eastern Kingbird and Baltimore Oriole have some earlier records, but only single birds spread through April [the kingbird even has one extremely early record from late March]. So what average arrival dates would you use for all these?

Dates of Peak Migrant Numbers of Reports and Birds seen through March

Ring-necked Duck	Reports	3/7 -6	3/14 -13	3/27 -22	3/28 -28
	Birds	3/10 -598	3/17 -801	3/22 -1137	3/28 -4258
Hooded Merganser	Reports	3/8 -10		3/24 -19	3/27 -24
	Birds	3/6 -23	3/8 -44	3/10 -90	3/23 -148
Northern Flicker	Reports	3/3 -3	3/29 -11	4/3 -14	4/13 -25
	Birds	3/3 -3	3/28 -10	4/5 -71	4/15 -463
Tree Swallow	Reports	3/10 -1	3/21 -2	3/28 -12	3/31 -20
	Birds	3/10 -1	3/22 -4	3/28 -28	3/29 -113
Eastern Phoebe	Reports	3/16 -1	3/27 -8	3/30 -13	4/6 -18
	Birds	3/16 -1	3/28 -17	3/31 -25	4/8 -42
Eastern Meadowlark	Reports	3/3 -3		3/25 -10	3/26 -42
	Birds	3/14 -11	3/17 -16	3/26 -42	3/28 -61
Red-winged Blackbird	Reports	3/1 -4	3/7 -13	3/18 -21	3/28 -24
	Birds	3/2 -158	3/7 -379	3/11 -737	3/21 -2349
Common Grackle	Reports	3/1 -3	3/10 -11	3/18 -22	3/30 -30
	Birds	3/2 -12	3/8 -535	3/21 -832	3/28 -2938
Song Sparrow	Reports	3/1 -5	3/10 -9	3/15 -19	3/27 -28
	Birds	3/1 -6	3/14 -48	3/21 -101	3/26 -335
Eastern Kingbird	Reports	5/2 -9	5/11 -23	5/23 -30	
	Birds	5/2 -11	5/9 -50	5/13 -101	
Baltimore Oriole	Reports	5/1 -6	5/6 -21	5/12 -29	
	Birds	5/1 -11	5/6 -154	5/12 -402	