

Celebration Spotlights Birds on the Move

By Olivia M. Hall

The robins are back! These harbingers of spring are joined by bluebirds, red-winged blackbirds, great blue herons, and a host of other migratory species making their way back to their summer breeding grounds.

Such migratory birds are the focus of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's seventh annual Migration Celebration on Saturday, May 11. This free event, which has drawn up to 1,400 visitors in the past, will offer a variety of family-friendly activities to showcase the Lab's diverse projects.

"Nationally and internationally, the Lab is known for its global bird research and conservation programs," says youth program coordinator Anne Rosenberg, who organizes the festivities. "But with Migration Celebration, we also wanted to show local people what goes on inside this building. They really seem to love it."

Recurring highlights include seeing live birds from the Cornell Raptor Program, exploring the Sapsucker Woods Sanctuary on guided bird and nest monitoring walks, listening to what birds sound like as they migrate at night and observing wild birds being banded.

Migration Celebration is part of International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD), observed with some 450 events throughout the year from Canada to South America under the auspices of the nonprofit organization Environment for the Americas.

IMBD's theme for this year emphasizes the connection



Photo by Olivia M. Hall

A Canada goose brooding eggs near the entrance at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

between north and south by highlighting life cycles that might carry migratory birds from the northern boreal forest—"song bird factory in the summer," according to Lab ornithologist Kevin McGowan—down to Central and South America, the Caribbean or Florida.

"The idea is that the birds that we welcome each spring are birds whose life cycle—breeding, wintering and migratory pathways between them—takes place on a very big geographic scale, as opposed to our resident birds, with whom it all happens right here," Anne Rosenberg explains.

"It's not just that the birds are going to the south and vacationing," says McGowan, an expert on bird behavior. "It's better to think

of them as migrant workers that live in the south and only come here to exploit the harvest. With that interconnectedness comes the highway that they travel along. And these birds do need to take rest stops, and those places where they can refuel are just as important in the chain of the life cycle of these animals as any other place."

For example, a number of shore birds rely for fuel on the eggs of the horseshoe crabs that spawn in the Delaware Bay. However, commercial overharvesting of the crabs has caused a crash in some of these bird species. "It's not that their winter or breeding habitat was bad," McGowan explains. "They got stuck at the rest stop on the way and didn't get back to the breeding ground in as good a shape."

During the long flights, cities can pose a particular danger. "There are events that happen, like fog," says McGowan. "The birds get attracted to the light of a tower and then circle the tower and hit the guide wires and die. Sometimes that happens with the big skyscrapers in the big cities. There's a movement in a lot of the cities to turn off the lights, especially when the weather portends that there's going to be a big movement and confusion by the birds."

Even rural areas such as Tompkins County offer numerous quotidian challenges, on which one of this year's Migration Celebration activities, the Migration Mobile Adventure, sheds light.

Rachel Lowy, an Ithaca College student in environmental studies

and an intern at the Lab, describes the game that she and Rosenberg have prepared: "Kids, or adults, will pick one of three birds, either a Baltimore oriole, great blue heron, or wood thrush, and move from station to station figuring out what the bird eats, what habitat it lives in, its migration range on maps. Along the way, they put together a mobile that shows all these facts about the birds."

An obstacle course simulates the dangers that lurk on their path. The kid "birds" will have to dodge a person dressed up as a cat, jump between several hula hoops that represent broken-up habitats, and crawl under plastic wrap stretched between chairs, which stands in for a window. For adults, the obstacles also serve as a reminder to keep cats indoors, help preserve bird habitats and use decals or other methods to prevent birds from flying into windows.


Rosenberg hopes that such activities will help people connect with nature in a way that's engaging, fun and meaningful. "I think birds are wonderful ambassadors for that because they're the most accessible animal there is, other than maybe a squirrel. They're so variable and interesting. We see all the things they do, because they do them right here in front of us," she says.

Migration Celebration will take place at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods in Ithaca, on Saturday, May 11, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. For more information, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/birdday.

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