

It's a birding bonanza as neotropical migrants wing their way north from Central America and the Caribbean.

Spring Migration in Illinois

Story By Jeff Walk
Photos By Jerry Kumery



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Spring migration. It starts in dead of winter, on sunny days when male gold-eyes, dodging ice floes on rivers, start throwing their heads back in mating displays. The curtain call is a few yellowlegs and sandpipers lingering into June, so late—and just two or three weeks before the first migrants are already winging back south—that nineteenth century naturalist E.W. Nelson was convinced these Arctic nesting-species must breed in Chicagoland.

Ah, but May is when spring migration reaches a fevered pitch. The skies of Illinois are teeming with millions of birds, carrying fresh memories of Argentina

Male yellowthroats, a type of warbler, can be identified by their black masks.

A brilliant vermilion-colored body and black wings are the marks of a male scarlet tanager.

and the Yucatan to our forests, fields and streams, on their way to the northwoods and the Land of the Midnight Sun.

May is when birders criss-cross the state, soaking up the feathered richness of two continents, happily suffering through inconveniences like “warbler neck,” a soreness from looking up into treetops for hours.

May is when you don't have to go anywhere at all to see migration; birds can be anywhere. Or everywhere. All you need to do is look.

Most people think of spring as when “our” birds return home from their winter retreats to set about the business of nesting and raising young. But in all fairness, May is the month when tropical



(Photo By Adele Hodde.)

In contrast with her orange-and-black mate, drab colors help camouflage nesting female Baltimore orioles.

birds come through Illinois, often headed farther north, to take advantage of the short-lived flourish of spring that makes it possible to nest and raise young. Looking at the spectacular plumages of the wood-warblers, vireos, tanagers, grosbeaks and orioles, it's easy to understand these are tropical birds. And when the first cool winds blow from the north in August, they will begin heading home to Central America and the Caribbean.



For ages, people have marveled at migration. Today, we have a much better understanding of how birds migrate, which makes the feat more incredible. Neotropical migratory birds—hummingbirds, wood-warblers, vireos, tanagers and orioles—seen in Illinois in late spring are at or near the end of their trek, and the most amazing leg of their journey was completed weeks earlier. At dusk on days in March and April, birds take off in hoards from the Yucatan Peninsula, flying north and northeast on a 600- to 1,000-mile nonstop flight to the Gulf Coast. With a good tail wind, birds can ride the “Yucatan Express” and make land fall in as little as 20 hours.

The migrants moving through Illinois are usually on a more leisurely pace. Most songbirds migrate at night, when temperatures are cooler and humidity is higher, reducing the risks of overheating and dehydration. By day, they feed and refuel for the next leg of their journey. Other birds, like hawks, move by day when they can take advantage of ther-

mal updrafts that enable a lower-energy, “solar-powered” migration.

Weather certainly affects the short-term timing and speed of migration, with birds opportunistically using tail winds to their advantage. Spring conditions that produce thunderstorms—warm, southerly flows slamming into colder air—can also produce spectacular “fallouts,”



From the spring woodland canopy come the buzzing trills of Northern parulas (left) and the Robin-like songs of red-eyed vireos (right).



(Photo By Adele Hodde.)



Birders enjoy searching the woodland canopy for summer residents, including summer tanagers. Males share in the feeding of nestlings.

when birds riding the southerly winds are forced to the ground along frontal boundaries. If you are lucky enough to be under a migration fallout, at dawn you are likely to be treated to as many birds in a few hours as many people see in an entire season.

Length of daylight is the broader cue that choreographs migration. As days grow longer, birds' bodies literally change as production of different hormones directs birds to store fat for migration and exhibit *zugunruhe* or migratory restlessness. Many birds on spring migration are only 10 or 11 months old, and rely on hard-wired instincts rather than experience to guide

them to their summer homes. These instincts, linked to day length, are incredibly precise. Each year, festival goers count on swallows to return to the Mission at San Juan Capistrano in California on March 19. Less famous are the "buzzards" (turkey vultures) of Hinckley, Ohio, that have returned to their summer roost each year on March 15 since 1818, when a great hunt left behind unwanted parts of game animals for the scavengers to feast on. Just as reliably,

Colorful markings—rusty cheeks on the male Cape May warbler or the breast on the male rose-breasted grosbeak—provide identification clues.

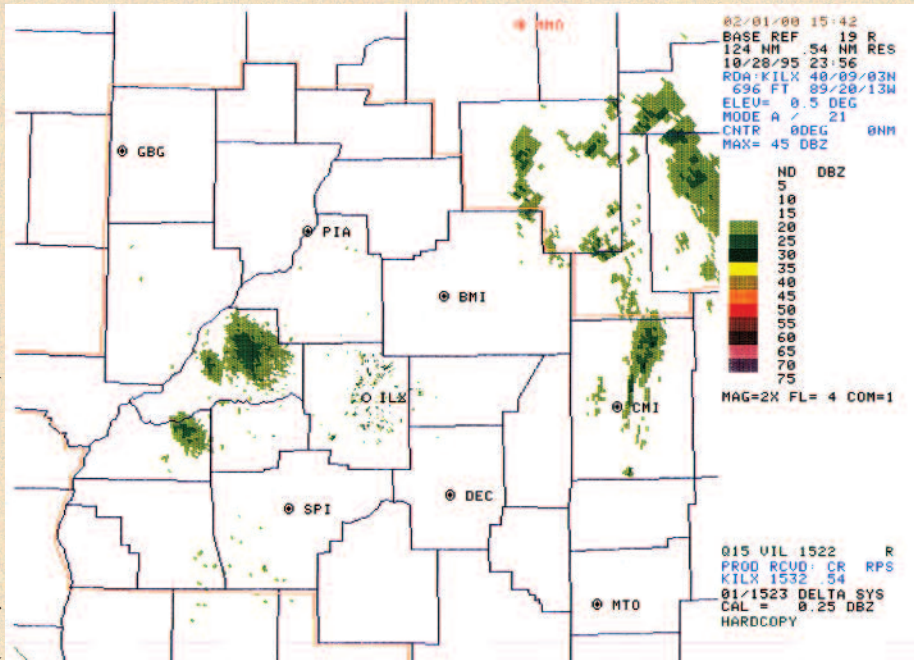
Baltimore orioles return to central Illinois the last week of April and bobolinks to northern Illinois the first week of May.

Unlike waterfowl and shorebird migration, with apparent flyways and stopover locations, the migration of billions of songbirds is a huge advancing cloud that eventually blankets all of North America. Finding migrating birds is as simple as finding the places that offer food and security.

In southern Illinois, the difficulty is not finding habitat, but finding the best viewing opportunities. The Garden of the Gods Wilderness Area in the eastern Shawnee National Forest allows birders to climb rock features and get to eye level with treetop birds.



(Courtesy of NOAA's National Weather Service.)



Radar image not only track storm systems but also migrating birds, bats and insects.

The Emiquon and Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuges near Havana are representatives of the best waterfowl and shorebird locations on the Illinois River. Pool 19 of the Mississippi River near Nauvoo is the place to see spectacular concentrations of scaup, canvasback and other diving ducks in the early spring.

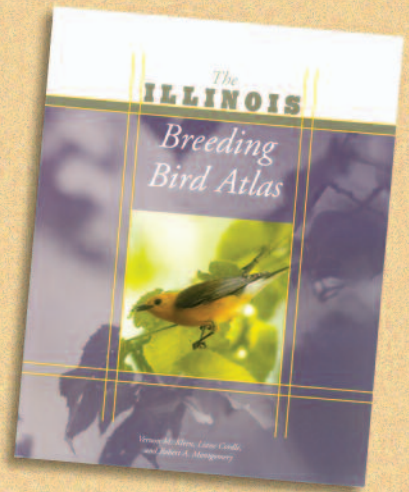
Stuck between a rock and a hard place, with Lake Michigan to the east and a scarcity of remnant natural habitat to the west, migrant birds on the Chicago lakefront pack into "migrant traps," such as Jackson Park and the "Magic Hedge" at Montrose Harbor.

Experience and effort are at least as important as location. On a good day in May, it is possible to see more than 100 species in any county in Illinois. So grab your hiking boots, field guide and binoculars, and get outdoors!



Dr. Jeffery Walk had worked as a scientist with the Illinois Natural History Survey and coordinated the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan for DNR, and recently accepted a position with The Nature Conservancy.

Canada warblers (below right) have a distinct eye ring while solitary vireos have "spectacles."



The Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas

From 1986-1991, ornithologists spent a collective 45,000 hours surveying nesting birds in nearly 1,300 blocks (roughly 10 square miles each), systematically located across Illinois. The result is an incredibly detailed portrait of the breeding distribution of birds in Illinois. Each species account includes information on natural history, historical changes in abundance and distribution, and abundance trends at the Illinois and Midwestern scale.

To purchase (\$25.95 plus 25 percent for shipping and handling) a copy of this useful reference, contact the Illinois Natural History Survey Publications office at (217) 333-6880, and request a copy of *The Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas*, by Vernon Kleen, Liane Cordle and Robert Montgomery (Special Publication 26).

