

Spring Migration 2022 Champion Plants

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Spring was back this year! There was so much missing in the landscape last spring after the “Big Texas Freeze” as the habitat struggled to recuperate through the season. I remember how the migratory birds had little to no food available for them in their passing. The insects were hardly there, and some of the plants didn’t have enough time to flower and fruit on schedule for the migration. There even were a few plant species that normally flower in the spring that never bloomed at all!

Tennessee Warbler in huisache tree



To mitigate the dire situation, and with the help of gracious donations and volunteers, we impaled hundreds of orange halves onto the ends of dead tree limbs and supplemented the edges of the garden hedgerows with hundreds of store-bought mealworms to help the tired and hungry migratory birds as they passed through the SPI Birding & Nature Center.

This time around, the spring felt so much better as the expected blooms, fruit, and insects were present again, and some in abundance! An amazing sight after two years! I had almost forgotten how spring was really supposed to look and feel. It also seemed like some of the plants were trying to make up for the skipped flowering and fruiting season last spring; and the wildlife took advantage!

My favorite sight and the one I had missed the most were the flowering **coral bean (*Erythrina herbacea*)**. These trees only bloom in the spring and are such a unique and attractive looking plant in the landscape. Their greenish and thorny trunks, bare of leaves from the winter, shoot out spikes of pinkish tubular flowers that completely cover the tree.



The locally breeding Hooded Orioles seem to have a keen affinity for the flower’s nectar and you can often get amazing looks at them just by hanging around a coral bean. For most of April, these trees can also be absolutely swarming with big, black, female Southern carpenter bees. They were completely buzzin’ for the blooms, but they rob the nectar by piercing a hole at the base of the flowers.

Carpenter bee attracted to coral bean

This spring I learned that migratory tanagers are also attracted to coral bean. The attraction is not for the nectar, but for the buzzing carpenter bees! Tanagers love to eat bees and wasps and the sight of a bright male Scarlet Tanager snatching carpenter bees from the flowers was one of the memorable moments of this spring migration for me. It serves well to know where the flowering coral beans are in the area to find some cool birds!

One of the things I like about Port Isabel and SPI is that a good number of coral beans have been planted in yards as ornamentals even though all parts of the plant are poisonous; they are just so pretty and grow so well! Making passes by them during spring migration can be fruitful most of the time.



During a birding run around the neighborhoods on SPI, I found my highlight migratory bird of the season on a coral bean. A Painted Redstart, a migratory warbler that one usually must hike up a mountain and into canyons along the western border lands to see in the US, was hooked to a flowering coral bean outside of a friend's house! It was my first for Cameron County!

Painted Redstarts are very rare in our area and the bird was seen by more than a hundred birders in the following days as it simply just hung out by the coral bean. It makes spotting a bird so much easier when they have a favorite tree! Special thanks go out to Shane and Stephanie Wilson, who were so nice in welcoming birders to their yard to see the Painted Redstart and for creating such an amazing environment for the migrants.

Painted Redstart appears in Cameron County

Another champion tree this past migration was the **white mulberry (*Morus alba*)**. This non-native was introduced from China into the US in the 1600's and is considered invasive in some parts of the state. They don't seem to be a problem in the RGV and instead seem to be a great help for spring migrants. Mulberries start fruiting right around the start of spring and the pink berries ripen purple around mid-April. After an extremely wet summer and winter, they had a bumper crop of berries this spring!

This tree is commonly planted in coastal yards for several reasons: it grows fast, tolerates the salts well, has broad and dark green leaves, lacks thorns and prickles, attracts birds, and because people seem to also enjoy eating them.

We planted a six foot mulberry about four years ago at the SPI Birding & Nature Center and now it is about 25feet tall or so! The tree was constantly visited by Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Gray Catbirds, Summer Tanagers, Scarlet Tanagers, and Orioles through the month! By early May the tree had been picked clean of berries. I think it especially helped a poor Summer Tanager that had lost its tail during its migration. It hung around and ate from the tree for almost two weeks before it moved on.



Mulberries provide food for Gray Catbirds

Other notable mentions this spring include the profusely blooming **yellow sophora** (*Sophora tomentosa*) and **scarlet sage** (*Salvia coccinea*) that were fancied by migratory Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, monarch butterflies, and brought back the black swallowtails, who I hadn't seen in a couple of years at the SPIBNC.



In addition, accolades to the **huisache** (*Vachellia farnesiana*) and **tepeguaje** (*Leucaena pulverulenta*) for providing insects for the warblers in their dense and tiny leaflets, and **pigeonberry** (*Rivina humilis*) for having the perfect size berry for a Philadelphia Vireo on the go.

Scarlet sage is a nectar source for black swallowtails

Spring migration is such an amazing thing to witness. A flush of plants, flowers, fruit, and bugs to help the birds along, here and gone in a short whirlwind.