

## Spring Migration 2023

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It feels like spring literally flew by! It can feel that way when we have an exciting spring bird migration with plenty of action as we had these past months. It seemed like we had waves of migratory birds land on the island at least once, sometimes twice a week as the birds met quite a bit of northern headwinds throughout the season. Despite the challenging winds, I didn't see many totally exhausted birds this year, so I think most did well, which is always good to see.

Every spring is different and has its own set of unique environmental factors that come into play. While the winds might be the biggest factor in terms of how many migrants we see touching down on the island, winter precipitation, as well as how early or late the spring comes, dictate what sort of foraging conditions the birds are going to meet when they arrive.

Last spring, the mulberry trees were completely loaded with large crops of berries. Gray Catbirds, tanagers, and grosbeaks gorged on the berries well into late April. This spring, the trees didn't bare much of a crop and the Kiskadees ate most of the berries before the migration even ramped up!

Differences in the spring seasons can be noticed just about anywhere. For example, around mid-April I made a pass by my friend's Shane Wilson's side yard where I had found a rare Painted Redstart last spring on April 18. The redstart was attracted to a large and blooming coral bean tree and this year that same tree's blooms were already mostly spent when I passed by. Even though I checked it around the same time as I had last year.

This is why plant diversity is so important in a habitat. Some years certain species will be the big players during migration. In following years when the big players from years past aren't producing for whatever reason, other species could have an important impact. It's kind of like a sports team, the squad must have a good depth of players if the team is to perform to a sustained standard and win!

This early spring had pigeon berry and Turk's cap performing together to high quality. These two are always amazing as a pair, almost like they were meant for one another. Together they

make a fantastic understory in shady areas. That type of environment is precisely where I found a bird that I really wanted to see this spring, a Worm-eating Warbler. One of my favorite sights of the early spring was finding this bird foraging through the Turk's cap understory in the Songbird Alley on March 29. I missed Worm-eating Warbler last spring, and since they are rare as fall migrants through our area, I missed them then too, so that means I hadn't seen one in two years! I locked my binoculars on it for a good while and savored the moment.



Worm-eating Warbler on Turk's cap



Rose-breasted Grosbeak eating pigeon berries

The following week, the first male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks arrived on April 6 and enjoyed plentiful amounts of juicy red pigeon berries while feisty adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbirds claimed and defended patches of bright red Turk's cap blooms at different corners of the gardens.

The migration then started to come thick about mid-April with the passing of several cold fronts. Mid-season warblers started showing up in good numbers all over the island, including a couple of highly sought after male Cerulean Warblers. This species can be a bit slippery and since I was slow to react, I missed them. But I was redeemed by a pretty female Cerulean that showed up in the front gardens on April 18. Cerulean Warbler is a bird that I personally use to measure the overall success of the habitats that we have created at the birding center; it is the garden's goal bird. I feel this way because they are a near threatened species, so when I see one utilizing the habitats that we have grown it makes me feel like the job is complete. This gorgeous sky-blue warbler mostly spent its time foraging between two tenaza trees. The legumes with tiny leaflets seem to be favorite foraging trees to warblers looking for insects.



Female Cerulean Warbler on tenaza

A few days later, buntings started showing up just in time for our Earth Day celebration! Spring rains by then had brought on fresh growth in the gardens, including the patches of guinea grass. Most of the time we are fighting against invasive guinea grass in our habitats, but April is an exception, and the buntings are a perfect excuse to just lay back and let it go for a bit. Painted and Indigo Buntings flocked in grass bunches to enjoy the grass seed during our spring migration celebration.



Indigo Bunting on Guinea grass

Around this same time, I also noticed that the Mexican wild olive trees were totally thick with blooms! Such a beautiful sight in the gardens. There weren't many butterflies on the wing at this time, but I was happy to observe the Baltimore Orioles poking their heads into the big white star-shaped flowers to sip on the nectar. A nice little energy boost for their migration!



Baltimore Oriole nectaring on wild olive flower

Migration felt like it came to a sudden grinding halt towards the end of April as the passage of north winds dwindled and lost intensity. My body felt like it hit a wall after having gained so much momentum trying to keep up with the migratory waves. The tiredness finally had a chance to set in. Things weren't over just yet though, a slow flow of birds continued to trickle in as we came into May. Chestnut-sided Warblers kept the motivation up.

Early May was hostile. The island got battered with a line of destructive thunderstorms baring 80-100mph straight-line winds. We lost several large trees in the gardens, which is always a sad sight. After one of the storms, a migratory flock of about 40 Cedar Waxwings arrived May 14 on site. Cedar Waxwings are on their own agenda when it comes to migration. Their movements are more dependent on the availability of berries, their main food source. They nest across Canada and in some of the farthest northern corners of the US. They are late season nesters who take



their time getting to breeding grounds as they enjoy different types of fruit on their travels. They arrived at the birding center for one thing and one thing only – Berlandier's fiddlewood berries. The numerous bushes had been loaded with berries and I was afraid that most would go to waste, but the waxwings are still here as I type this three days later and likely won't leave until they've eaten them all! They've been a joy to watch as the curtains of the migration show close.

Cedar Waxwing feeding on fiddlewood berries

Spring migration is such an incredible spectacle of nature that always leaves me in total awe and extremely exhausted. But most of all, I feel happy and grateful to be able to help these migratory birds as they pass through. The quality of habitat at the birding center wouldn't be possible without the collective efforts of staff, Texas Master Naturalists, and community volunteers. Our efforts make a difference and enjoying the fruits of our labor inspires us to keep planting native habitat. That we will do. The birds need us more now than ever.