

Autumn Migration

By Pete Gilmore

As you read this issue of the Newton Conservators' Newsletter, millions of songbirds are in the midst of journeys that would terrify humans. They are navigating thousands of miles, often traveling from North America to South America.

They have a particular sort of intelligence that enables this behavior. They use multiple clues to guide them including the stars, the sun, the earth's magnetic field and the local geography they pass over, such as shorelines. They learn the North Star as a point around which other stars rotate and use the field of stars in that area to navigate.

When one system, for example the stars, fails them due to cloudiness, they fall back on another system. Nothing, of course, can save a big flock of migrating birds that's out over the water when a sudden, violent storm arrives.

The journey varies widely, depending on the species.

The Bar-tailed Godwit, a large sandpiper, nests in Alaska and flies nonstop for nine days to New Zealand for the winter. We know this from microelectronic tracking devices attached to the birds. Flying this far without food or sleep seems physically impossible. It certainly is fraught with danger, yet the species is a success, in evolutionary terms.

On our own coast, the Blackpoll Warbler, a small wood warbler that passes through Newton on its way south every fall, takes off from eastern North America. They fly non-stop to northern South America, a journey of about 2,000 miles on average, in three or more days. These birds fatten up to around $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce before they take off and lose about $\frac{1}{7}$ of an ounce in the flight. This is a tiny bundle of muscle, fat and navigational intelligence. A percentage of these birds come down on islands like Bermuda en route. Some Blackpoll Warblers do migrate down the eastern seaboard before launching out across the water to South America.

Throughout September and October, our parks are visited by lots of little wood warblers like these Blackpoll Warblers.

All of them are migrating south. There are about 25 different species that you can reasonably expect to find in Newton's parks each fall. It takes binoculars to really see these diminutive folks. If you are lucky, one may show up low and close to you and be a "naked eye bird."



Blackpoll Warbler

You can see in the picture of the Blackpoll Warbler that these birds are fairly nondescript, but if you manage to see the legs, they are the only little warblers with light-colored legs. They are often one of the later migrants to pass through Newton in the fall.

Switching back to shorebirds, in early August Dan Brody came across a Spotted Sandpiper feeding along the shoreline at Crystal Lake. This bird had finished breeding and was on

its way south. Spotted Sandpipers breed in Massachusetts. They like fresh water habitats like river banks and lake shores. You may see them along the banks of the Charles River. During migration they will travel at least as far as the Gulf coast in our southern states. Many Spotted Sandpipers leave North America entirely for the winter, spending that season in South America. Some birds winter as far south as Paraguay and Peru.



Solitary Sandpiper

There are other sandpipers that frequent fresh water habitats and can be seen during migration in Newton. In addition to the Spotted Sandpiper, there are the larger Solitary

Sandpipers and very small Least Sandpipers.

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The final photo shows a sign of the migratory departure of our summer birds: it is the skillfully woven nest of a Baltimore Oriole. This pair nest near Cold Spring Park, using the same tree again and again, but they build a nest anew each year.



Oriole Nest

It is now empty and will not be used again. This pair, together with their fledged young, have already departed from Newton, heading south. The orioles spend their winters in Central and South America, with some birds wintering in south Florida.

The nest is a marvel of craftsmanship, a secure sack that keeps predators

from the eggs and young while the parents search for food to nourish their family. It is amazing to watch the female oriole as she twists long strands of grass and small vines to secure the nest to branches and twigs. She then continues to weave these materials into the main body of the nest. This year, she added a human donation of blue ribbon. The nests in our area are out near the ends of branches so the squirrels can't get at the eggs.

As our summer nesters leave us, soon the birds who nested far to our north begin to arrive. They travel less spectacular distances since they remain on our continent. A good way to see the birds coming here for the winter is to set up a bird feeder and to keep it stocked with food. You should get the pretty White-throated Sparrows, our resident cardinals, Carolina Wrens, goldfinches and Mourning Doves as well as House Sparrows. The Dark-eyed Juncos will be showing up in early November in Newton. Some of these birds actually nest in the Berkshires and prefer the feel of a more northern place. This environment is provided by the altitude in the western part of our state. Our cardinals, Blue Jays and crows are year-round residents.

This summer we had a new corvid bird in our area, the Common Raven. Pairs are now nesting in Waltham, West Roxbury and on the science building at Wellesley College.

They were seen around Cold Spring Park this spring, and were in Newton Highlands this summer. Since these birds usually are permanent residents at our latitude, look for them as you walk around our neighborhoods. They are larger than crows and have a curved shape to the end of their tails, whereas crows have a square end to their tails. Even more distinctive is their croaking vocalization which really catches your attention if you are listening.



Common Raven

Because Common Ravens were killed by humans until recently, they learned to stay away from our species. They started to move into our suburbs in the last few years and found that not only do we no longer shoot them, but we throw food like French fries and Big Macs around on the ground. Expect to see and hear more Common Ravens as the years go by and the litter continues.

There is a beautiful new book that describes the intense and short life of a gifted young woman who documented the nests and eggs of the birds of Ohio in 1879. These birds are about the same as our birds in Massachusetts. The book is *America's Other Audubon*, authored by Joy M. Kiser and published by Princeton University Press.

The young woman in question, Genevieve Jones, would surely advise you to walk around in Newton's open areas and to listen, look and smell the wonderful world we live in. If you don't share her passion for the different architectures of nests, there are many other experiences in nature that can soothe your agitated soul. ■

• **Lanny McDowell's photos can be found at:**
www.lannymcdowellart.com

• **George McLean's photos can be found on facebook**