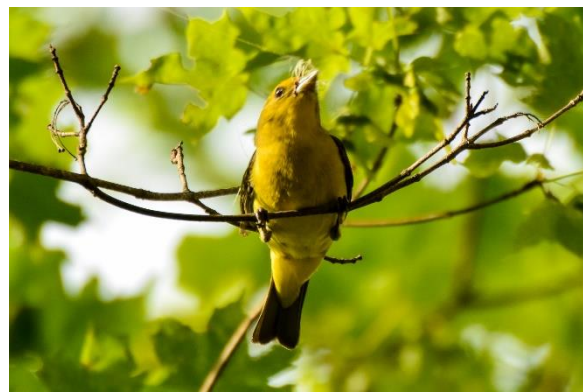


NATURE NOTES - JULY 2020

It is tempting to think that during the heat and humidity we experience during July the local birds are as lacking in energy and motivation as their human counterparts. However there is another reason why we are not hearing or seeing too much in the way of bird life at the moment: moult. A feather is a “dead” structure, rather like hair or nails in humans, and made of the same protein: keratin. This means that when they get damaged, feathers do not heal themselves and must be completely replaced. This replacement of all or some of the feathers is called moult. Moulting keeps birds in top flying condition by replacing feathers that have become worn or damaged with completely new feathers. In addition to providing a new set of healthy feathers, moults often provide a new look to the bird’s plumage, new colors or patterns that can indicate the bird’s age, sex, or the season of the year. Moulting occurs in response to a mixture of hormonal changes brought about by seasonal changes and can be either complete, in which the bird replaces every one of its feathers over the same moult period, or partial, in which the bird replaces only some of its feathers (for example, flight feathers or body feathers). Most songbirds moult twice a year, either fully or partially. Full moult usually takes place once the young have fledged and partial (or another full) moult just prior to returning to their breeding grounds. The beautiful bright plumage that we see in the spring is the alternate plumage and the drabber plumage achieved in the fall is the basic plumage. So be warned, if you want to spot the gorgeous male **Scarlet Tanager** in his bright red spring and summer finery - do it now. Very soon he will be as inconspicuous as the green female.



While they are moulting, songbirds are very vulnerable. During wing moult, for instance, several of their feathers will be less than full length, producing gaps in their wings, so the birds are not as maneuverable or powerful in flight. They thus tend to vocalize infrequently and hide in vegetation, thus minimizing the chance of attracting the attention of predators. This is not to say that it is impossible to see birds in July, although many birders do hang up their binoculars until fall migration is underway. There are three things that one needs to bear in mind, however. Firstly you need to be out there early before the heat builds and while there is still some chance of the odd vocalization. Secondly you need to be prepared for bugs. Mercifully, the deer flies seem to be on the wane now but earlier in the month a short walk along the Tay-Havelock railway bed trail, which crosses 36 just to the north of us, produced a very full deer fly strip on the back of my cap. Plus there is a lot of standing water around the lakes and especially along the railway trail. This attracts mosquitoes which tend to be active early in the morning as well as last thing in the evening. So bring insect repellent. Thirdly, as mentioned, the birds are trying to be

inconspicuous, so are moving cautiously if at all. One therefore also needs to bring a healthy dose of patience plus the ability to identify birds by sound. This actually gets harder to do as the beautiful warbles and cantatas of spring are replaced by chirps and chips, but occasionally, especially at dawn, you get a snatch of song that betrays the identity of the singer.

All too much trouble you think; however a walk around Rainbow and Silvery Lanes last week produced 47 species, including a beautiful bright red Scarlet Tanager. His song sounds like a robin with a sore throat but his call note, an emphatic “Chick-burr” is a real giveaway to his presence. Females sing too. A pair of lovely **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were also spotted along Silvery Lane, thanks to their distinctive metallic “chink” call and while I stood still listening and watching for other



birds, a pretty little **Chestnut-sided Warbler** flitted into the vegetation. The harsh chatter of a Baltimore Oriole betrayed the presence of a scruffy-looking moulting male high up in a maple and an Eastern Towhee gave himself away by his whiny call note but then burst into his full “Drink Your Tea” song. Quite vocal and easy to see in the marshy areas were Common Yellowthroats, with their “Witchity, witchity” songs and call notes sounding like two pebbles being struck together.

If you are interested in learning bird songs, there are many resources available. eBird, an incredible international database from Cornell University, has thousands of examples of bird songs: <https://ebird.org>. You just select Explore, type in the bird you want to check out and then hit Listen. There are also apps which you can download to your phone such as Sibley Birds and Audubon Birds, all of which have songs for the species they feature. However you have to have some idea of what you are listening to. Brand new is a mobile app for Android called BirdNET which helps in identifying songs right in the field. An IOS version will be available soon. I also will be happy to loan lake residents the Peterson Audio guides Birding by Ear and More Birding by Ear, which to me are the quintessential teaching tool for learning bird song. They are old and unfortunately not easily available. However they actually teach how to identify particular songs, give “handles” for remembering sequences of sounds, note the importance of habitat in narrowing down possibilities and when paired with field experience are absolutely invaluable. Lastly, if anyone would like to take a bird sound stroll one early morning, drop me a line. The advantage of starting to identify bird sounds at this time of year is that there are very few birds calling so you are not overwhelmed with too much to learn all at once.

Stay safe and cool!

Alison Bentley, Rainbow Lane Area Representative
alisonbentley@gmail.com

With thanks to photographer Stewart Bentley for the illustrations.