

Green Scene: Nature Walk to see the Migratory Birds of Colony Farm Park

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Male lazuli buntings with their blue heads and red breasts are one of the most colourful birds to be found at Colony Farm each summer. *Hilary Maguire photo.*

Colony Farm Park is gaining a reputation for being the birding hotspot in the Tri-Cities area. With a diverse mix of habitats including some regionally-rare tall grass meadows, the Park attracts a variety of birds including quite a few that are more reliably found in drier habitat of the BC interior. The number of bird species found at the Park is now over 200, so approximately 40% of all the birds ever seen in BC can be found at certain times of the year at Colony Farm. This time of year, during the busy nesting season, is one of the more spectacular times for bird-watching. The Park fills with several species of warblers, flycatchers, vireos and sparrows, many of which have migrated long distances to reach Colony Farm.

The bird population in the Park swells this time of year because so many birds fly from their southern winter homes to nest and raise their young here. Why some species of birds undertake such long and remarkable migrations twice each year remains one of nature's mysteries. Biologists believe that these

arduous journeys are worthwhile for the birds because the northern hemisphere produces an abundance of insects to eat as well as bountiful crops of berries and nuts during the brief summer growing season. These prolific sources of food plus the long daylight hours for foraging are thought to create ideal conditions for rearing the next generation. In contrast, in the tropics, summer daylight hours are shorter and competition can be fierce for more scarce food resources.

Not all the birds that arrive at Colony Farm each spring will stay to raise their young. Some of them simply stop at the Park to feed and rest and then continue further north. These include beautiful birds such as the ethereal mountain bluebirds which will continue on their migration after a few days of feeding. Other birds, such as the western tanager with a brilliant red head will stop temporarily at Colony Farm and then seek out secluded nearby forests such as Burke Mountain to nest. Migratory birds require safe stopovers to rest and refuel during long migrations.

With the help of miniature radio transmitters coupled with clever experiments and many hours of careful observations, scientists are unraveling some of the mysteries of bird migration. Most songbirds are now known to migrate during the night. At dusk, these birds use the polarized light of the setting sun to take a heading for the each night's flight. During the day, the birds rest and feed to gain strength for the next night's journey. Birds may also use the rotational patterns of stars to orient themselves in a north/south direction. While some of our birds, such as the colourful lazuli buntings and black-headed grosbeaks, migrate directly north from places such as western Mexico, others such as barn swallows, Swainson's thrushes and purple martins fly from South America across the Gulf of Mexico and then head west to the Pacific coast. Not only does each species of birds have particular migration patterns but individual birds appear to know exactly where they are going. This only makes sense; after all, if they have nested successfully in a certain location the previous year, then why not return to the same site? Nonetheless, such habits speak volumes for their amazing homing abilities.

Recent experiments have shed more light on the impressive homing skills of migratory birds. Biologists in Germany housed migratory European robins in sites screened from local background radiation and found these birds were able to orientate themselves to the magnetic field of the earth. This suggested these birds also have a magnetic compass to use as a fallback when cloudy weather or fog obscures the setting sun and stars. The most surprising finding was that, when these birds were exposed to very low intensity electromagnetic noise similar to what is used for AM radio transmission, they were no longer able to orientate themselves with the earth's magnetic field. This finding that very low intensity radio transmissions can interfere with the homing ability of birds suggests they are very sensitive to such frequencies; this could also explain why migratory birds are sometimes fatally attracted to radio transmission towers. Previously, this was thought to be due to the lights that illuminate these towers at night. Establishing parks to provide habitat for migratory birds, keeping cats indoors and drinking "bird-friendly" (i.e., shade-grown, organic) coffee are some of the things that people can do to help ensure migratory birds will have successful journeys and productive nesting seasons.

This Saturday, June 7th at 9 am and 3 pm, the Colony Farm Park Association is offering 2 hour nature walks to enjoy the beautiful lazuli buntings and other migratory birds of Colony Farm. These walks, which are free and suitable for all ages, will start from the large parking lot at the end of Colony Farm Road next to the Community Gardens which is accessed from the Lougheed Highway in Coquitlam. Washroom facilities are now available. Participants are advised to wear sturdy shoes, dress appropriately for the weather and bring binoculars if they have a pair. Knowledgeable birders from the Burke Mountain Naturalists will be available to lead public walks at 9 am and 3 pm. These walks offer an opportunity for people to get acquainted with the diversity of birds that use this park. More information is available at www.bmn.bc.ca.