

# Green Scene: The Miracle of Migration

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[photograph]

[caption: Western tanagers move through the Tr-Cities in mid-May and nest in heavily wooded areas such as the higher elevations of Burke Mountain. The male, shown here, looks like an unusually large goldfinch with a bright red head.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: the miracle of - and threat to - migration]

If you are an early riser with a penchant for a brisk stroll, you may be enthralled by the dawn chorus that now greets you each day. As that old song goes, “the hills are alive with the sound of music”. You are listening to the lilting trills of dozens of birds as they sing to advertise their suitability as potential parents or mark their nesting territory. There is also a dusk chorus that is somewhat more muted but is certainly worth catching as well.

Over the past two weeks, the songs of local birds have been augmented by those from thousands of migrating birds arriving from as far away as South America. Biologists speculate these birds migrate to take advantage of bountiful food supplies which are exactly what they require to raise the next generation. Many migrants are insect-eaters but some favour seeds, berries or even fish. Regardless, by late spring and early summer, the northern temperate zones of the world should have plenty for all.

In the Americas, there are three major flyways; the Atlantic, the Mississippi through the middle of the continent and the Pacific flyway along our coast. While these flyways overlap to some extent, they represent ancient pathways that birds have followed for thousands of years. The birds undertaking these long migrations are called neotropical migrants as they come from tropical regions within the western hemisphere. Migrants include the black-headed grosbeak, several species of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, swallows, hummingbirds and even ospreys. These birds are thought to take advantage of weather systems during migration and use tailwinds to conserve precious energy. Guided in part by the position of the setting sun as well as their own internal compasses, many songbirds migrate at night. Feeding areas for refueling along the way are essential for a successful journey.

When Rachel Carson wrote “Silent Spring” in 1962, she described the loss of birds and the music from their mating songs caused by poisonous pesticides. Now, migrating birds face a new threat – global warming. For thousands of years, a relatively stable climate has allowed special relationships to evolve between birds and their food sources. For example, hummingbirds have come to rely on certain nectar sources by migrating through the American southwest just as desert flowers are blooming. If bloom time is triggered by temperature but birds migrate according to length of day, then, with rising temperatures, the flowers may be blooming too early for the birds passing through to be able to utilize them. Both birds and flowers lose. The birds fail to find critical refueling food for migration while the flowers fail to get pollinated.

Dutch scientists recently documented such a mismatch between a species of flycatcher and the caterpillars they prey upon. Although caterpillars were emerging two weeks earlier because of warmer springs, the flycatchers had not adjusted their nesting period to the same extent which made it difficult for birds to find sufficient food for their young. As a consequence, these flycatcher populations appear to have declined by over 90% in only two decades.

One of the more spectacular neotropical migrants is the beautiful turquoise-coloured lazuli bunting, a bird more likely to be found in the BC interior. Over the past decade, this songbird has formed a small breeding population at Colony Farm Regional Park where they have discovered suitable nesting habitat in the shrubby fields. The Colony Farm Park Association is hosting free public birding walks on Saturday, June 10 at 9 am and 3 pm that will be led by expert birder, Istvan Orosi. If you wish to learn more about neotropical migrants and observe warblers, swallows and possibly, the elusive lazuli bunting, consider joining one of these walks which will depart from the parking lot at the end of Colony Farm Road in Coquitlam just off the Lougheed Highway.