

Green Scene: Check Out These Spring Arrivals

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[photograph]

[caption: Bullock's oriole, a brilliant orange bird with black markings and a much smaller bill than a black-headed grosbeak, nests at Colony Farm Regional Park.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

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Perhaps you haven't noticed the invasion that began quietly a few weeks ago and is now reaching its peak. Individuals have been arriving, mostly in the early hours of dawn, hungry and exhausted from long hours of flight. I am, of course, referring to that annual rite of spring, the arrival of thousands of birds from Mexico and other countries in Central and South America. People like me, i.e., birders with binoculars, have been awaiting their arrival with much anticipation. We are always quite relieved to note their re-appearance and be reassured, once again, that nature has triumphed. In recognition of this annual event, this Saturday has been designated as International Migratory Bird Day.

We tend to call these migrants "our birds" but, in fact, they are really only summer visitors drawn here by the abundant food supplies for raising a new generation. Migratory birds have remarkable navigation skills that enable them to fly for hundreds of miles every night after taking a heading on the setting sun. Typically, they eventually make their way back to the places where they successfully raised their offspring the previous year. It's an amazing feat of navigation for such a small animal to find its way back but banding studies have shown, e.g., that hummingbirds from Mexico can return to the very same backyard in Coquitlam.

Most of the migratory songbirds are insect-eaters drawn back to North America by the summer abundance of caterpillars and other bugs. Prior to the development and widespread use of pesticides in the 1950s, migratory birds were considered to be highly valuable allies of farmers and foresters. Part of the rationale for the governments of Canada and the USA to pass the Migratory Birds Convention Act in 1917 was to provide legal protection for nests and young of these vitally important birds. Unfortunately, times have changed and the pesticides that many farmers now rely upon can harm and kill the very species that were once considered vital partners.

In the lower mainland, most migratory birds seek out shrubby areas along streams or forested areas in local parks. Only a few species will be able to feed and nest successfully in, what is for them, more hazardous suburban areas. In residential neighbourhoods, for example, domestic cats on the prowl can pose a grave risk to young birds. Vegetation in backyards is rarely sufficiently dense to provide a good screen from the unwelcome attention of predators such as the Steller's jays and grey squirrels who like to snack on bird eggs. In addition, gardeners who use pesticides can inadvertently poison young birds raised on a constant diet of grubs.

One migratory bird that appears to do well in suburban areas is the black-headed grosbeak. It winters in Mexico and was first noted in the lower mainland at Burnaby Lake on April 30. Their suburban presence is probably explained by their habit of supplementing their diet with seeds available at bird feeders. The

brilliant orange and black colours of male black-headed grosbeaks sometimes results in them being mistaken for orioles, another migratory bird, but one rarely seen in residential areas.

People who wish to learn more about migratory birds can now consult two excellent books published just last year. “Silence of the Songbirds” by Bridget Stutchbury, a Canadian biologist and “Songbird Journeys” by Miyoko Chu, from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology are both available at the Coquitlam Public Library.

To celebrate International Migratory Bird Day, events will be held at Colony Farm Regional Park on Saturday, May 10 between 1 and 4 pm. A hedgerow walk at 1 pm through the community gardens will highlight the various bird species that bring some benefit to these organic garden plots. A longer walk at 3 pm will take people into other parts of the Farm to view birds. These events, free and open to the public, provide an excellent opportunity to get better acquainted with some of our more spectacular summer visitors.