

Green Scene: Wet Weather Woes

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[photograph]

[caption: In addition to the challenges of a reduced food supply this spring, purple martins nesting near Nicomen Island must also contend with rising waters under their nest boxes during the Fraser River freshet.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Our spring water woes are (bad) for the birds]

With the first official day of summer this weekend, I can only hope this cold wet spring will soon be nothing more than a mouldy memory. Likely, most of us had some event dampened by miserable weather during the past few weeks. While we may have been slightly inconvenienced by this unseasonable weather (thought to be due to unusually cold ocean currents), those of us who observe birds have been worried about impacts on local wildlife.

The cold weather appears to have delayed the ripening of berries on which some birds rely for food this time of year. Similarly, the insects that are a vital food for many species of birds appear to be less plentiful than normal. In fact, it is the abundance of berries and insects in a typical spring that attract so many migratory birds back north every year. During the spring season, birds mate, build nests, lay and incubate eggs and, finally, rear their young. These are all activities which require a high-energy diet.

While finding food for several hungry young nestlings obviously requires a great deal of energy, the process of incubating eggs is also demanding for birds. Eggs must be kept at normal body temperature for proper development. This requires a source of heat that can only come from the body of the parent. To successfully incubate eggs, most birds develop a brood patch on their abdomen, an area of skin where extra blood vessels grow to promote heat exchange during the weeks of incubation and rearing. Because feathers insulate so well, they interfere with heat transfer between parent and eggs. Thus, the brood patch becomes bare. During cold nights this spring when temperatures dropped to just above freezing, many of us were probably kept warm by furnaces and blankets. In contrast, the heat generated by birds to incubate their eggs could only come from the food they found while foraging during the day. And this spring, the foraging was especially challenging for many of them.

Several people with bird feeders in their backyards have commented on the unusually high traffic at their feeders this spring. My experience seems to have been typical and I have never had suet, seeds or bottles of sugar water disappear as quickly as they did this spring. Apparently, suet has been an especially hot item at the local bird food store this spring. Of course, feeding birds this time of year must be done with caution because bears are no longer hibernating. It's important to ensure that bird feeders don't become snack bars for bears. Because our yard does not border on a greenbelt, we rarely have a bear in our yard during the day (nights are another story). Thus, by putting out bird feeders only during daylight hours we can avoid feeding bears while continuing to provide vital sustenance to the birds. I have to admit, though, that I never quite manage to serve breakfast at 5:30 am when the birds would prefer.

People volunteering at the wildlife rescue centres this spring report unusually low numbers of young birds have been brought in to date. While this is only anecdotal evidence, it suggests birds are not reproducing at normal rates this spring – at least, not yet. Similarly, at the purple martin nest boxes at Rocky Point in Port Moody where careful counts have been made, volunteers report less than half the number of birds this year compared to 2007. If birds are unable to find sufficient food, some will move on to other areas while others may abandon nests already started. Others may simply delay nesting until food sources are sufficient. For example, studies have shown red-winged blackbirds will alter initiation of nesting by three weeks depending on their food supply.

Time will soon tell if many local birds have simply delayed nesting because of food availability or whether this will be a year with higher than normal nesting failure. Nonetheless, this unusual cold weather serves as a reminder of how much the survival of species depends on stable patterns of weather. This is something we all need to keep in mind as the earth heats up from our greenhouse gas emissions.