

However, I remembered this forgettable moment the following morning when forty robins suddenly appeared in the yard. Along with a majority of obvious black-headed males, there were drabber, more softly-patterned females among them. And now they concentrated efforts in a cotoneaster loaded with berries...fruit that the local wintering birds had disdained. The robins attacked the cotoneaster berries so heavily over the next week or so that, as I glance out the window this afternoon, hardly a berry can be seen remaining where there were thousands (hey, this cotoneaster is very nearly a tree!). For several days, there were hundreds of robins in my neighborhood. Driving around town, I saw that there were throngs of robins altogether around Arcata. As they peaked in numbers, the sex ratio appeared to level out at about 1:1. Yet today these swarms are gone. What was the story here?

What I had been able to figure out, beginning with notice of just two everyday robins, was that our yard had become one of innumerable local focal points for large numbers of robins which were clearly on the move. And although I can't say I saw a single one of them flying north in migratory flight, I know full well from experience that this is what occurred. Surely, the robins we saw here near the end of last month might well now be in Astoria, or in Victoria. A classical harbinger of spring in colder climes, robins appear in large numbers in mid-continent in late winter and early spring. Having spent a few days lately in a terribly bleak Illinois winter landscape, I can imagine the impact of a swarm of robins such as the one I experienced here in Humboldt. What we do not often recognize is that robins migrate through our area as well. Their movements are sometimes difficult to notice because large numbers remain both in summer and winter. But the initial preponderance of males--such a constant fact in the northward migration of abundant species--helped tip me off. Taking a moment to ponder what I had seen, it all made sense. When a full-scale northward push of robins occurs, it's tough to miss... if you pay attention.

Savvy birders acknowledge that daily birding has almost nothing to do with rarities. Greater than 99% of birding involves experiencing common and abundant birds. By the same token, the greatest part of bird-learning takes place as one ponders common birds. A smart birder maximizes opportunities to become more skilled by keeping this in mind. By paying attention to what birds you see, and thinking about them, you define what is 'normal' for a given period of the birding year; by remembering what you feel is 'normal' for that period, you increase your ability to detect the anticipated reaffirmations of seasonality from year to year. A personal calendar of birding events need not exist on paper. Carry it in your brain, and add to it or revise it whenever you encounter migratory influxes--including your 'firsts' for a given year.

This April and May as the legions of southern-wintering insectivorous birds return to your Atlas block, make note of the changes you perceive. You'll discover the open hillsides enlivened with the songs of Lazuli Buntings on some morning, while at the same time the first Warbling Vireos may be singing in the oaks... but which morning? Can you reasonably expect their return to occur about the same time the following year? Take note of the date-- birds are quite strongly tied to traditional timetables. Birthdays and anniversaries aside, each day of the year can begin to assume a memorable significance all its own if you take a moment to ponder the events which continually dot the unwritten avian calendar.

Of year-birds, robins and attention to what matters (April 1997)

by David Fix

As a birder, and as the most interested chronicler of my own life, I tend to remember what has happened. Long ago, I fell into the habit of remembering what took place on seemingly inconsequential dates long in the past. Friends sometimes ask me how in the world it is that I am able to recall what happened on a given day. It might be, say, April 14th, and I may mention off-handedly that, on this date in 1978, I saw my first Black-throated Gray Warbler of the year. It was in a Red Alder in a woodlot now long razed and planted in overpriced townhouses, and it was in the upper portion of the crown (no, I don't remember in which direction it was facing when I spotted it!). Why have I remembered this trivial event? It made an impression on me because there had been an influx of migrants that morning, and I felt strongly that there would be a fancy new outrider among the northbound swarms of "Audubon's" Warblers. I worked with past knowledge, having found that Black-throated Grays typically arrived in that area around the third week in April, and that a few 'pioneers' usually showed up before the main portion of the population moved through. The experience was an affirmation of a growing ability to roughly predict when certain birds might show up.

While such a recollection of dates and circumstances may seem remarkable, the flip side is that I cannot remember most of the birds I've seen. The figuring works this way: I consider that, without question, I have taken notice of at least ten million seen-or-heard birds since I began birding intensely, when I was fifteen. Yet only a vanishingly tiny fraction of these have, for whatever reason, been memorable in themselves, so that the great majority have been seen or heard, appraised, and quickly disregarded... then forgotten. I can estimate with assurance that the percentage of birds I have seen or heard and cannot remember so closely approaches 100% that---and here's the amazing point--- I might claim that nearly the totality of my birding experience has been utterly lost to memory. Given this, why, then, have I been able to learn anything at all about birds?

The key to learning anything at all substantive or revealing about anything is, first, to take in the greater picture. Because we assimilate knowledge a bit at a time, the next step in considering anything is to fine-focus with a feeling for what details to pay attention to, pondering and retaining the niceties that help define the essential characteristics of the experience. Conversely, what is deemed "not to matter" can be forgotten, or avoided. Barry Lopez ends one of his earlier short stories about the inherent sparseness of the human perceptual experience with the comment that the protagonist, a material minimalist with a penchant for easy efficiency, knows how to avoid what is unnecessary. Faced with a thousand and one options and the unceasing urgency of chore prioritization, this is true in much of daily life.

And, in the midst of a galaxy of feathered beings, it is surely crucial in learning about birds. Many persons with an interest in birds see much, yet fail to pick up on details which define the set of circumstances they're experiencing. They glimpse a complex and ever-shifting milieu of birds in their backyard, yet turn from the window without having had that one crystal moment of awareness which may take their understanding of, say, songbird migration just a tad bit farther. Rather than continuing to paint with broad brush here, I'll draw a more precise illustration of my point.

On a morning in February just past, I saw a couple of American Robins running about on the front lawn. Although I see robins probably every day around Arcata, I hadn't seen a robin actually feeding on the lawn in some time. Each bird was a bright, bold male and both of them looked plump and well-fed. Possibly recently-arrived? They were just robins, they're too common to pay attention to...