

## Birding the Dog Days

“Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer,” sang Nat King Cole in a voice as sweet and smooth as molasses. Summer days can be as sticky as molasses, too, especially when it’s August and you’re swaddled in long sleeves and pants to keep out the bugs. Sunscreen is buttered on thick. A pair of 10-power binoculars hang like lead around your neck, and your brain finds more appeal in a cold drink and a cool swim than in sorting out plumages of migrants and soon-to-be migrants that can’t be bothered to sing. The waning days of summer signal an end to the breeding season and the urge for songbirds to proclaim nesting territories by singing. Once their last nestlings of the season have fledged, singing is no longer relevant in their lives.

### What’s a birder to do?

When the calendar delivers lemons, we might as well make lemonade. Whatever the thermometer says, August is prime time for getting out and looking for fledglings. Young great blue herons are out by then plodding through shallows, trying to master the art of stabbing fish, frogs, and anything they happen upon and missing more than they grab.

In the Hill Country of Texas, things quiet down but Carolina wrens can still be counted on to take on the role of alarm clock. Bells, yellow-throated & white-eyed vireos are a constant. The clatter of kingfishers up the river can still be heard. Even a white-breasted nuthatch can be heard on rare occasions. My neighbor was surprised at how much calling she heard between 7-8:30 a.m. recently. Yellow-billed cuckoo, Carolina wren, black-chinned hummingbird, eastern wood pewee, painted bunting, rufous-crowned sparrow, Inca dove all were calling as she sat on her back porch. When she went for a walk in the pecan bottom, the most noticeable birds she heard were yellow-billed cuckoo (incessantly), Inca dove, Northern cardinal, and Bell’s vireo.

If birds are playing the quiet game, you can usually create a party by turning the sprinkler on near a hedge where northern cardinals, summer tanagers & vireos will flock in to perch & shower. Pull up a chair with a good summer read and get ready for the show.

August, of course, is time to fatten up. Some of us do it at backyard barbeques with hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad and homemade ice cream. Long distance migratory birds do it to lay on aviation fuel for journeys to the Yucatan, the Amazon, or beyond, and resident birds gorge because those who face the winter filled out with fat reserves have a far better chance of living to see springtime than do birds that eat sparingly.

August is time for most baby birds to be up, out and flying. Our mission as bird watchers is to brave the heat, humidity, and bugs to enjoy them. It’s entertaining to watch a group of 5 or 6 lark sparrows on the church lawn knowing they are most likely a family on an outing similar to the one you just took at Schlitterbahn. Well maybe not that much fun, but...

A favorite memory: A sultry summer night, a friend and I along with some of our brothers and sisters trying to ward off boredom. There is little or no television yet available and certainly no

computers or iPods. We are lying around in the boys' bedroom that faced the pecan bottom (no AC either). Wayland doesn't say a word, just begins to hoot near the window. Before we know it, great horned owls begin to answer and come up close enough to see in the moonlight. About the best way I can think of to be entertained on a lazy summer evening.

Go outside & play!