

More Thoughts on Fall Migration

In the birding world, it seems that late summer and fall get neglected as a prime season. Winter and spring get all the hype—winter for its gulls, waterfowl, and swarms of songbirds flocking to backyard

feeding stations, and spring for its array of colorful, hormone driven songsters that constitute the heart of migratory action. Once the spring migrants have either passed through or settled down and claimed their territories, things seem to quiet down. The singing stops, and a lot of us birders tend to lose our enthusiasm for going out and tracking down birds. In fact, if you were to look through my collection of birding journals from a few years ago, you would find nearly daily entries from the start of the year until about midsummer, and then notice a sudden blackout of birding activity.

Fall migration—who needs it? I’ve seen all the birds there are to see this year. See you again in January. Fortunately, I’ve begun to change my foolish ways and pay more attention to fall migration. And I’ve discovered something: Spring migration is only half the show! All of that excitement and action happens not once, but twice, every year. Sure, things are a little different the second time around—some of the birds are sporting different plumage and things are a little less noisy—but the action is still there. In fact, since migratory routes differ between spring and fall for many species, you can encounter birds during the latter season that are hard to find the first time around. Plus, fall migration is prime time for migrating shorebirds and raptors.

Here are a few tips I’ve picked up that are helpful to keep in mind when birding during the “offseason,” especially for warblers and other neotropical migrants.

Review your field guide. Many of our migrants, especially the warblers, look completely different in their nonbreeding plumage. Review some of the species you are likely to encounter in your area, reminding yourself of key field marks and noting the overall shape and impression of the birds.

Bird frequently. Things can change hourly during migration, so don’t limit yourself to only the first hour or two of daylight. Last fall I would bird the same spot three or four times a day—just a few minutes at a time as I had the opportunity—and see different species each time (often in the same tree). Just like during spring, anything can happen during fall migration.

Watch closely. Since the birds are not singing during the nonbreeding season, you don’t have the luxury of waiting for unfamiliar bird songs to clue you in to the presence of a migratory songbird.

Scan trees carefully, watching for movement, and listen for call notes. Pay attention to sunlit spots, as insect-eating birds tend to congregate there looking for prey. Many a wave of warblers has been found just by taking a moment to stop walking and start looking.

Look for chickadees. Chickadees are very popular birds. All of the cool birds know to hang close to chickadees. Kinglets, warblers, and vireos will often follow these familiar birds, forming a feeding flock.

If you hear a couple of chattering chickadees, check each bird in the flock—you have a good chance of spotting a migratory bird among them, sometimes right in your own backyard.

Install a water feature in your backyard. Because many migratory species such as warblers and vireos tend to stay high in the treetops, they often go unnoticed in our backyards. Moving water can be a great way to lure some of these winged treasures down into plain view. Invest in a pump or fountain, or do it the old-fashioned way: Hang a jug of water over your birdbath, poke a small hole in the jug, and then let the dripping water attract magnolia and chestnut-sided warblers to your window. If you've been in the habit of taking the latter part of the year off, don't neglect fall migration again this year. Take the plunge, and you may experience some of your best birding yet.

Bird Watcher's Digest by Kyle Carlsen