



Critters in Our Midst: Fall Migration by Carol Ellis

A Common Yellowthroat visits a water source late in the afternoon.

Lately there has been a lot of talk about getting healthy again. There is plenty of room for common ground with this discussion... after all who doesn't want to be healthy? Getting started is half of the problem. Often we place too much emphasis on how disciplined we must be, and set unrealistic goals which become more of a chore than a healthy habit.

Vitamin D. Birdwatchers walk a lot, but not at a fast pace, since there are breaks when you stop and listen and look for birds. The excitement of the search for birds inspires you to walk farther than you normally would. A fitness expert told me that for every 45 minutes of walking, you earn an additional day of life... longevity earned one step at a time!



Cape May Warbler forages for insects in a Wild Tamarind tree.

Birdwatching has surprising health benefits, and is good for the body and soul. First it is widely accepted that getting out in the fresh air and sunshine is good for your mind, and your body benefits from absorption of

My first birdwatching experience came two and a half years ago in May during Spring migration. I was helping survey for butterflies, when someone spotted a Cape May Warbler. I took a photo

which I later used to confirm the identity, and to learn the bird.

Spring and Fall are the major times for bird migration. Songbirds fly South in autumn by the millions, including many young birds, some less than three months old. Their sheer numbers are staggering, and it is a great time to get to know a vast number of birds, in both mature and immature development. The Spring migration however is more popular, as the birds have had time to develop adult plumage and work on their repertoire of songs.

For centuries man wondered about the seasonal movements of birds. Migrating birds move at night guided by the stars, orienting themselves by landmarks and sensing the earth's magnetic field. Basic information such as how many birds, how high they flew, and where they were going remained a mystery. The earliest researchers extrapolated numbers by viewing the sky and counting how many bird

silhouettes were defined when they passed in front of the full moon.

In the last 80 years, thanks to the end of World War II and the donation by the Navy of 25 radars to the National Weather Service, scientists have used weather radar to track migration. Using radar they can now "see" millions of birds cross over the Gulf of Mexico on a non-stop flight of 600 miles. For migratory birds, their life is short and full of perils.



American Redstart with an eye on a small green worm in a Wild Tamarind (Lyceloma) tree.

Many songbirds live less than two years and 85% of them die during migration. Our role as caretakers of this fragile planet is more important than ever before, to ensure the survival of migratory birds. They need a reliable source of food and water, and lots of it.

Though migratory birds may come to bird feeders, their preferred food is found growing on native trees and plants. It is not just the fruit and seeds, but also the insects that are found amongst the leaves and branches. As I write this, I am sitting under the large ficus tree... just outside my door... my special place for "wildlife" inspiration.

Fall Migration...

CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



A Black and White Warbler probes for insects in the roots of a fig tree.

As a beginner birdwatcher, all you need to be successful is a quiet place and one bird. Add to that a pair of binoculars and a field guide, or an app on your phone like Merlin Bird ID (merlin.allaboutbirds.org) and you are well on your way. The best place to start birding is close to home. It may only be for 10 minutes at a time in your backyard, local park or

nature area, but you will get to know a few birds that you see frequently. Once you are comfortable with that you can join a birdwatching group which would have knowledgeable participants familiar with good birding spots.

The Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a great time to start birdwatching. Oftentimes



It's important to provide fresh water for migrating birds. Photo series of a Palm Warbler enjoying the benefits.



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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.

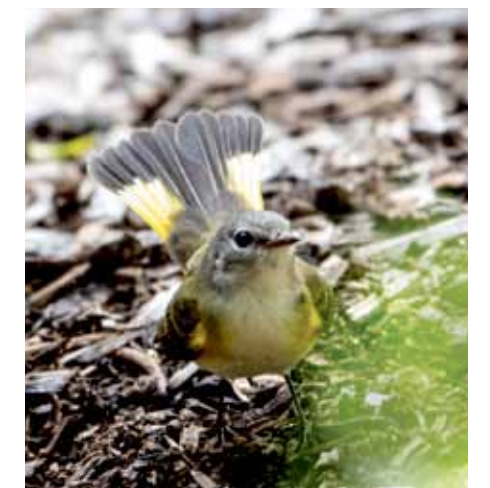
newcomers think they are not knowledgeable enough to participate in the CBC; this is simply not true. What is great about the CBC is that the organizers create teams of individuals having a variety of experience and skill level. There are always participants willing to teach newcomers.

The 125th Annual Audubon CBC in the Upper Keys will commence at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge visitor's center located at 10750 County Road 905, Key Largo, FL. Participants will meet on December 21, 2024 at 7:00 a.m. to join up in groups divided for counting in each particular sector of the count circle.

If you are interested in joining, you need to sign up ahead of the event. Contact Suzy Roebing at mullet_mansion@yahoo.com.



Male Prairie Warbler. Blue Hole, Big Pine Key. Photo by Isabella Collamati



American Redstart blends in with the mulch.



Female American Redstart in a Seagrape Tree - Blue Hole, Big Pine Key. Photo by Isabella Collamati