

Bird Lore Early Nesters

By Dan Brauning

It was a calm, clear morning in February. Although the sun felt warm, winter still had its grip on central Pennsylvania. But there it was – a clear whistle. The simple, plaintive notes of a Tufted Titmouse called from the treetop. Emboldened by the increasing daylight, he sang a brief song to announce his presence and stake out his territory. This was his opening salvo of the 2022 nesting season. And that song was a clear announcement of coming spring. Almost a promise.

Titmice are permanent residents. They don't depart in the fall for warmer climates like so many songbirds. They stay put, in the same territory year-round. Along with other familiar winter birds like chickadees and the White-breasted Nuthatch that visit feeders locally, a titmouse can find sufficient food in its territory to survive the bitter cold winters of our region. It is all about food. Birds that specialize on insects generally move south when freezing temperatures predominate. The swallows, most warblers, and many other bird groups must undertake extraordinary journeys each year. They cross many miles to go where their food supplies are available. One of the advantages of staying put is that you don't have to undertake the risk of a long migration.

Another advantage for permanent residents is that they can get an early start on the nesting season. Resident pairs have a long enough breeding season to produce two or maybe three broods per year. Titmice will do just that! Starting a nest in late March, they can have young out of the nest in six weeks and do it again in May and June. That's why he was singing in February to get another nesting season underway. This capacity to produce young two or three times a year has ensured that this dapper little bird remains common throughout our woodlands, even after populations were impacted by diseases such as West Nile Virus a few years ago. . The bright Northern Cardinal and Carolina Wren are also among the group of early singers.

Other birds that begin their nesting season before winter's grip has broken may surprise you. You may have encountered online the videos of a bald eagle, sitting tight on her eggs, under a pile of snow. The dedication in that stark situation is stirring! Check it out – you'll hardly believe your eyes. Why would they risk their young by starting so early? More than three months are needed to raise a young eaglet, so the mother has to lay eggs even while there is still a chance of late-winter snow. With that long nesting period, she gets only one chance a year! And those March snowstorms can be heavy! The mother is not impacted by a layer of snow over her insulating feathers, but the eggs have no such protection except the incubation of the parents. So, the adults sit tight, even under snow, occasionally shaking it off while protecting those precious eggs. This same process happens for other larger birds that nest early, such as Great Horned Owls or Red-tailed Hawks, but without the limelight of a camera on its nest, we don't see these birds experience such harsh conditions.

The March song of a titmouse contributes to the chorus of bird activity that helps set the rhythm of our lives. Summer and winter, springtime and harvest. Likewise, birds come and go in a remarkably predictable pattern. Some of the more notable highlights of spring include a flock of blackbirds (Common Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, or a combination of the two) passing on their way north. Grackles, recognized by their glossy sheen and longer tails, waste no time starting nests high in spruce trees in many of our suburban neighborhoods. Remarkably, these birds complete their nesting in May and generally don't produce a second brood. Each species employs its own unique strategies.

Other species employ this early nesting strategy outside our suburban landscapes. Even though they migrate south each fall, the engaging dance of the timberdoodle (more properly, American Woodcock), is also on display this time of year in grassy patches with woodland borders. Listening for these

delightful songs right around us on a warm March day, we are properly cheered by the hope that we have made it through another long winter and look forward to the coming spring and summer.

Photo credits:

- 1) Bald Eagle: David Rein, 2015 Audubon Photography Award
- 2) Tufted Titmouse: Lauri Shaffer
- 3) American Woodcock: Lauri Shaffer

