

Birds Exemplify the Cycle of Life

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Lycoming Audubon

One of the themes of this “Bird Lore” column is the annual cycle of bird life. The marvels of bird migration, which follow our seasonal changes, result in a wonderful diversity of bird life throughout the year in the central Susquehanna Valley (and of course, worldwide). This edition reflects on what’s happening with birds during the summer doldrums, the lazy days of summer, the dog days! Bird life in July! While we are seeking a cool refuge from the July heat, birds are wrapping up their nesting season, preparing for harder times ahead.

In late June I strolled through Short Park in Montoursville on a mission to tally birds for Pennsylvania’s Third Breeding Bird Atlas. I witnessed two young Red-tailed Hawks testing their wings, circling the park, and actively screaming (probably for mom to feed them). They were free from the nearby nest where they’d been hatched and where they had been tethered for the previous 40+ days (70 days if you include the time in an egg!!!). The Atlas project had documented the adults building the nest in February. It was exciting to see the fruit of those efforts in the flight of their young. With such a long nesting period, the adult hawks were done nesting this year. A few days later a group of friends came across a group of young American Redstarts, recently out of the nest, actively begging for food from mom and dad. The free-flying young were evidence of a successful nesting season. That’s late June and July.

The nesting season is an intense time of year. Some songbird species have initiated a second brood or may even try to produce a third set of young this year. Closely monitored bluebird boxes document this process, but other species, like the American Robin, also nest two or three times through the course of the year. After starting nests in April, mom and dad bluebirds and robins are often found building a new nest and raising a second or even third family in July. It’s called double (or triple) brooded. This kind of reproductive success bolsters the population tremendously and undoubtedly contributes to the success of species that can pull off two broods a year. Not all species are wired for this, but whatever their strategy, the abundance of insects and seeds at this time of year provides perfect conditions for young to grow and become independent. July is for juvenile birds!

Over 130 species of wild birds nest in central Pennsylvania, and for most of them, this is the time to wrap up another nesting season. It’s a busy season. Adults and young alike have the seasons wired into their DNA. They know that winter is coming, and they need to get ready to either pack up and move to warmer climates or (if they remain here year-round) to survive locally. Each species has its own seasonal strategy. Whatever it is, they must build strength and fat reserves for leaner times or long migration flights. Our woods fields are now full of juveniles and adults getting ready for winter. They’re focused on eating insects and native fruit that are full of fats. You won’t hear as much territorial singing; birds get much harder to observe as the summer matures. Young become quiet as they no longer depend on their parents to provide food. Everyone is actively eating, and trying to avoid being eaten. So, bird activity

becomes deceptively low by the end of July, even with the combined total of adults and this year's young resulting in there being more individuals around than at any other time of year. They're busy eating.

With hundreds of species seen in Pennsylvania each year, some begin long-distance movements in July. Notable among these are long-legged wading birds (mostly herons) from southern states that, having nested much earlier in the year, are seeking food along the waterways of the mid-Atlantic states. The low water flows of late summer make fish more accessible. The all-white Great Egret frequents the Susquehanna River and other major tributaries in July and August. Less frequently, the smaller Snowy Egret and young Little Blue Herons (which happen to be white also!!) may make an appearance along our waterways this time of year. This reverse dispersal adds a little diversity to the dog days here in central Pennsylvania. Another group on the move in July are shorebirds, like the Lesser Yellowlegs, which pass through Pennsylvania in the spring, in route to the Arctic. They start their southbound flights after a quick nesting season to escape the hastening freeze. Birders look for these early southbound migrants on muddy shorelines locally. Each species has a strategy that allows it to survive.

Bird diversity is enriched by these various migratory strategies, but enjoying these birds takes effort. The summer days are hot and buggy, birds are not drawing attention to themselves with territorial singing, and young birds have different markings, adding a challenge to them this time of year. But every month of the year, including July, offers a diversity of species to appreciate, as each species goes through its annual cycle, and finds a way to live in this constantly changing world.

Photos:

1. Red-tailed hawk. Sarah Beck, 2015 Audubon Photo Award.
2. Robin nest with eggs. Photo by the author
3. American redstart fledgling. Calvin Borgmann, 2023 Audubon Photo Award
4. Great egret. Patricia McGuire, 2017 Audubon Photo Award.

