

Bird watchers find prime conditions in preserve

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One late winter day, the little rufous hummingbird registers a change in day length somewhere in its 3.4-gram (0.12-ounce) body. From the limb of a southern Mexican tree it rises into the air. Time has come to make the journey, to migrate north for breeding, and to obey the instinct bred into the species over probably 2 million-plus years of evolution.

Before this diminutive puff of feathers is resting on its Mexican branch again next winter, it will have flown at least 5,000 miles round-trip to perhaps as far north as Alaska and back. In the process, it will face travel challenges which, in human culture, would be the stuff of immortal legend.

Wing beats for hummingbirds hit about 78 per second, 200 in a dive. Heart beats register at 1,260 per minute, breaths per minute at rest, 250. Considering the size and operational metabolism of this creature, and the magnitude of its annual quest, the capacity for endurance, resourcefulness and daring it demonstrates as a matter of natural habit is equaled in human form only by our greatest and most supernatural mythological heroes.

International Migratory Bird Day

On Saturday last, Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in Morongo Valley paid tribute to the little rufous hummingbird, and to all the other bird superheroes who are passing through this part of California right now on their way to various breeding destinations farther north. This was the preserve's third annual observance of International Migratory Bird Day, and the event is a natural for the wildlands park, owing to its status as one of the top ten birding hot spots in the state.

International Migratory Bird Day is the 1993 result of a collaboration between ornithologists at Cornell University and the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. It is now administered by a large association of public and private groups under the banner of "Partners In Flight, and key participating agencies are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation.

The purpose of IMBD, held on the second Saturday in May, is to raise public

awareness about this fascinating natural phenomenon of bird migration, and to especially call attention to the crucial importance of suitable habitat along the way for the temporary rest and recovery of these long-distance fliers.

Long-term observations have shown notable declines in some of the species' populations over recent years, and disappearing habitat, especially along the flyways, has proven to be one of the most, if not the chief, contributing factor.

An observation of birds

Although places like the preserve and events like IMBD do attract people with many different reasons for visiting wildlands, it's no surprise to see a majority of visitors at such places and events toting binoculars and frequently training them on some fluttering motion off in the distance.

Just what it is that attracts people to birding is usually never very satisfactorily identified; the typical response to the question, Why? usually taking some form of the non-answer: "Oh, I just like looking at birds."

This doesn't really explain anything. However, it's worth considering that millions of card-carrying birders around the world - the rest of us being more casual but observant nonetheless - may not need a reason for bird watching, simply because bird watching could be programmed into human nature. Just as the migratory bird rises, by nature, from its perch to fly perhaps thousands of miles every year of its life, we may simply, by nature, be moved to witness this marvel of stamina and resolve demonstrated by so small and seemingly inconsiderable a mortal thing.

Hercules in feathers

Maybe the speculation on why we watch birds isn't all that convincing, but the fact that birds, and especially migratory birds, are extraordinary creatures needs no convincing argument whatsoever.

Consider the arctic tern. At 12-15 inches long and about 11 ounces, this bird holds the long-distance flight record among all migrants. Every year it flies round-trip from pole to pole, logging 22,000 miles in the process, and considering the life span for these birds is about 20 years, the longest-lived of them will fly most of half a million miles in a lifetime.

The half-ounce, four-inch-long blackpoll warbler flies round-trip from New England to the Caribbean and South America every year. En route, it has to fly over the Atlantic and, being a terrestrial bird, this means one leg of its journey requires it to stay aloft for 80-90 continuous hours. Researchers from the Smithsonian have done the math on this, finding that the proportional degree of exertion for a human being

would amount to running four-minute miles non-stop for 80 hours. Energy efficiency for the bird calculated in gasoline makes it a 720,000 mile-per-gallon vehicle.

Most of the 350 species of birds migrating over North America will, regardless how long their journey overall, fly about 200-400 miles per day. Many species fly only under cover of night. Depending on whether they're diurnal or nocturnal fliers, the birds will navigate by stars, the sun and landmarks.

Smaller birds tend to fly at altitudes between 500-2,000 feet, while bigger ones have been observed much higher. One species of geese, for instance, has to clear the Himalayas in its journey, and verified observations have recorded individuals flapping determinedly away at 30,000 feet. How migratory birds cope with the circulatory stresses and oxygen deficiencies of widely variable altitude change is accomplished by huge hearts and lungs, and by a special adaptation to their blood which gives it enhanced oxygen transport capabilities.

A place to rest and refuel

"It's all about habitat," said Big Morongo preserve host and naturalist Dee Zeller, commenting on the importance of educational opportunities like migratory bird day. Whereas he certainly welcomed the occasion of such a special event to show off the many colorful birds in his vicinity, he wanted most of all for the people attending to see the preserve itself.

"It's important for people to learn about this place," he stated, explaining that only through some understanding of the preserve as an intact ecosystem could people, in turn, "understand why it is so vital to the tens of thousands of birds that depend on it to be here every year."

Many friends-of-birds were on-hand Saturday to talk with visitors about numerous migratory bird topics. Some discussed backyard feeding stations with people, some encouraged birding as a form of recreation, and one group talked about the hummingbird banding program conducted for data collection.

Naturally, the preserve representatives gave visitors a thorough overview of the preserve as habitat, but everyone present was more than ready to talk about the habitat issue with anyone who would listen. Many did listen, too, and eagerly, especially after they'd been out in the field looking at the little feathered dynamos there, taking a well-deserved break from the rigors of the road.

More than half the species seen that day were migrants. By now, most of them are well on their way farther north. After all, they only stopped at the preserve to eat and rest, and perhaps to enjoy a bit of the spotlight as guests of honor at IMBD.