

Nature Buzz
by Terri Treacy

Fall Migration: a Time of Renewal

Autumn is a time of dramatic changes when leaves begin to change color, days grow shorter, and crisp clean air often carries the scent of sugar and tannin. As we bid farewell to summer, we can look forward, with anticipation, to fall migration.

Each day during migration brings the possibility of seeing interesting birds, insects, reptiles, or bats moving toward their winter homes. Not all migration is created equal; migration patterns and the animals that migrate are extremely varied.

Some birds, such as warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and hummingbirds leave their homes in temperate climates for winter homes in the tropics where they will be able to find insects and/or nectar to sustain them. But birds are not the only creatures to migrate to tropical climes.

The Monarch butterfly migrates thousands of miles from as far north as Canada to mountain ranges in central Mexico. Monarchs usually pass through southern Illinois in large numbers during the first week of October. Thousands of them will often stop to rest by clinging en masse to tree branches.

Another migrating insect is the dragonfly. About a dozen species migrate the length of the United States to spend winters in the southern United States and Mexico. Dragonflies have a very short lifespan, so the dragonfly that reaches the tip of Florida and returns next spring is several generations removed from the dragonfly that first started out. Scientists are just starting to learn about dragonfly migration; there is much to be discovered.

Not all birds go to warm, tropical climates for winter. Many bird species migrate from more northern areas, such as Canada and extreme northern United States, to spend all or part of the winter right here in southern Illinois. Ducks, geese, and other waterfowl begin arriving in September. Some waterfowl stay here for a couple of months before continuing further south.

The short-eared owl and northern harrier hawk find southern Illinois a suitable winter home. Both birds share the same habitat; large, open areas with fairly short grass. They share roosts on the ground in the grass. The owls roost by day and the hawks roost by night.

Two common, winter migrants to this area are the white-throated sparrow and the dark-eyed junco (also a sparrow). They arrive in southern Illinois, almost simultaneously, in mid-October and are usually seen in large, sometimes mixed, flocks feeding along brushy roadsides and fencerows.

Some species appear to leave because they are absent from our yards and gardens for long stretches during winter. That haven't totally left the region; large flocks of like species will travel the region in search of food. Blue jays, cedar waxwings, and robins are good examples of this. In fact, it's not uncommon to find feeding flocks of up to 300 to 500 robins in winter.

When the flying insects are gone bats move to caves, old mines, abandoned buildings, under tree bark or leaf litter to hibernate for the winter. However, on warm winter evenings it's not unusual to see bats awaken from hibernation to hunt for insects.

Reptiles and amphibians are also part of the fall migration phenomenon. Snakes are famous for migrating from their summer feeding grounds to their winter dens. The Shawnee National Forest even closes a road for fall and spring migration to protect the snakes from vehicles.

Many other reptiles and amphibians move into burrows in autumn. The eastern box turtle burrows into soil or into mud in pond bottoms while the American toad is known for burrowing backwards into soil to spend the winter hibernating.

Anticipating migration events can actually make the transition to winter more enjoyable. You can become an active participant in this truly remarkable, natural event. Keep an eye on the sky and watch for all the birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and bats on the move. Imagine the all the snakes, frogs, toads, and turtles moving through the grass and brush in search of their winter homes. Try keeping a journal of sightings, including dates of departures and arrivals.

Autumn will come to seem more like a time of renewal, rather than the end of summer.