

The Five Seasons

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I wonder how long it would take you to notice the regular recurrence of the seasons if you were the first man on earth. What would it be like to live in open-ended time broken only by days and nights? You could say, "it's cold again; it was cold before," but you couldn't make the key connection and say, "it was cold this time last year," because the notion of "year" is precisely the one you lack.

—Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Practically everything in our heads is received wisdom. We didn't discover any of it on our own. Evolution, relativity, the round earth, the heliocentric solar system...not a one of us figured out those things by ourselves.

We didn't discover those things, and there's something else: We accept them on faith. Have *you* ever conducted experiments to confirm evolution or prove relativity; performed calculations to establish the relative orbits of planets; or gone out far enough into space to observe the roundness of the earth? I've met relatively few people who have done *any* of those things, and I doubt I'll ever meet anybody who's done all of them.

Even something so simple as the cycling of the seasons is received wisdom. Not a one of us figured it out on our own. We learned it from our parents and teachers, or maybe we read about it in a book. Unlike relativity and evolution, though, the cycling of the seasons, once learned, is easily grasped and easily proved: Just go out for ten or twenty years, and you'll sure enough corroborate the discovery of Annie Dillard's hypothetical first man on earth.

Spring, summer, fall, winter...spring, summer, fall, winter...spring, summer, fall, winter...

Now wait a minute. Dillard didn't say anything about that particular quaternion scheme. Who's to say there are precisely *four* seasons? Why not two, or five, or eleven? I'm being serious. In certain places on earth, we do in fact speak of a rainy season and a dry season, so just two. In the deserts of southern Arizona, the monsoons of late July and August certainly are different from the searing heat and drought of June and early July; so do they have five seasons down there?

The four seasons are arbitrary. They're engrained in our thinking. And that's especially so, I believe, in the case of birders.

Like many of you, I started birding in the eastern U.S. Let's face it: So many of our American birding traditions are of Atlantic Seaboard origin. Like the tradition of the four seasons: warbler migration in the spring, breeding bird surveys in the summer, geese flying south in the fall followed by Christmas Bird Counts and feeding stations in the winter. Over and over again, for all one's years as a birder.

As a teen birder, I was addicted to the journal of ornithological record then known as *American Birds*. The mainstay of that journal was—and still is—quarterly, seasonal reports. There were—and still are—four seasons, but they depart a bit from the sidereal reckoning of equinoxes and solstices. Instead, the seasons go like this: December–February (winter), March–May (spring), June–July (summer), August–November (fall). It works so well in the mid-Atlantic regions and in New England, where I lived and birded until I was 30.

Then I moved to Nevada, and I started to question the conventional wisdom. March and even April are pretty darned wintry in Reno; June is a great month for vagrants; and the whole idea of seasonality is completely messed up by the mountains and desert oases. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. And what happens bird-wise at the summit of Mt. Charleston is so out of synch with what's happening bird-wise at Corn Creek. Seasons, schmeasons.

After my tour of duty in Nevada, I came to Colorado—where I had an epiphany during the overnight hours of Sunday–Monday, July 29–30. At 1:00 A.M., my son Andrew, seven months old at the time, and I were out prowling the mean streets of Lafayette, eastern Boulder County, taking in all the sounds and smells and (limited) sights of a warm summer's evening: crickets chirping, bullfrogs groaning and the neighbor's dog yapping; the pleasing aroma of skunk spray and the barely discernible whiff of outgassing from a small marsh down the street and a Great Horned Owl gliding silently by. All those things, plus something surprising and wonderful: Chipping Sparrow flight calls, 17 of them during the course of a half-hour ambled through suburban Lafayette.

To make a long story short (and it's one I've previously told on the pages of this journal), Andrew and I were listening in on the amazing mid-summer nocturnal flight of Chipping Sparrows migrating east from the Rockies to molting grounds on the High Plains.

It makes all the sense in the world. There's one thing every Colorado bird *has* to do at least once per year. I'm not talking about breeding, as many birds—especially young birds, but also some adults—forego breeding for one or more years. Neither am I talking about migration, as some Colorado birds are effectively sedentary for their whole lives. Rather, I'm talking about molt. Some birds do it twice a year, but all of our birds do it at least once per year.

The timing of each bird's annual, or prebasic molt, is variable, but, for most residents and short-distance migrants, it commences during the summer, typically right after breeding. With long-distance migrants, it happens on the wintering grounds in the tropics. There are exceptions, but that's the general picture.

Back East, where I grew up, molt is easily overlooked. That's because the annual molt tends to occur either on or near the nest site or on the distant wintering grounds. One day, the birds are on their breeding grounds; the next day, they're packing up and heading south for fall migration. For residents and short-

distance migrants, the whole phenomenon of molt is elided in the Dog Days of August. For long-distance migrants, it happens in Ecuador or somewhere; out of sight, out of mind.

Here in Colorado, though, we are able to appreciate that the annual molt is a discrete phenomenon, quite distinct from either the nesting season that precedes it or the fall migration that follows. That's because many of our birds are what we refer to as "molt migrants." That term means pretty much what it sounds like: It signifies that a bird goes somewhere to molt. In general, the phenomenon is considerably more pronounced in western birds than in their eastern counterparts. Birds like Bullock's Orioles, Lazuli Buntings and Western Tanagers are molt migrants, but their eastern counterparts—Baltimore Orioles, Indigo Buntings and Scarlet Tanagers—are not. Same thing with populations we don't treat as separate species: Interior West populations of Warbling Vireos and Chipping Sparrows are molt migrants, but their eastern counterparts are not.

How come?

Earlier this summer, I was in a forest in northern New Jersey. Even though I was lathered in DEET, I was bitten, stung, and chomped on by every arthropod imaginable. Then I came back to Colorado and enjoyed a most delightful romp in the pinewoods in the foothills of the Rockies. No bugs! I could have birded butt-naked with impunity.

Lowland deciduous woods in New Jersey vs. montane pine forests in Colorado in summer. *Puh-leeze*. From the human perspective, it's no contest. Same with birds, but the result is precisely the opposite. There's not enough food in the woods in Colorado for birds to complete their energetically costly annual molts. So they bail out. They go elsewhere to molt—to rivers, marshes, or just low seeps and swales, generally to our south and east. Some of them don't go very far. Others make it all the way to the desert oases of New Mexico and northern Mexico. They molt there, then carry on in fall to their wintering grounds.

I need to be clear about something. I'm talking here in generalities. Molt—like breeding and migration—is a somewhat "plastic" life history trait. If conditions warrant, birds will dramatically alter their migratory and breeding schedules. Drastic decisions—raise a second brood, don't bother migrating—are heavily influenced by the weather. And they differ from individual to individual. The same caveats apply to the question of when and where to molt.

A user-friendly introduction to molt migration is given by Michael Donahue in an article in *Birding* ("Migrants, Mono Lake, Monsoons, and Molt"), May/June 2007, pp. 34–40. The article is available as a free PDF download from the American Birding Association: tinyurl.com/Donahue-Birding.

As I type these words, I'm sitting outside in my back yard pondering the ar-

bitrariness of the idea of the four seasons. According to the calendar, it's "July" (whatever that means), but the night sky says otherwise. Capella is rising in the Northeast, the Pleiades are way up there and Fomalhaut is nearing the meridian. I've just described the night sky in autumn—unless you're out in the hours before sunrise in mid-summer.

As if on cue, a Chipping Sparrow just flew over, at 2:29 in the morning. It was up there a ways, but it's a still night, with no traffic yet on Baseline Road, and the sparrow's little voice pierces the dark sky. [*There goes another.*] To refer to the bird as an "early fall migrant" is a stretch. The bird's southward fall migration will come much later. For now, the bird is heading east.

I wonder how far it will go.

Given the hour, I suppose the bird could make it all the way to the Kansas border or beyond. Or maybe it will stop flying at the Brett Gray Ranch in Lincoln County or in one of the lush, buggy groves out along the South Platte River east of Denver a bit. Or maybe it won't make it any farther than the miserably mosquito-ridden cattails of Greenlee Preserve, just down the road from where I type.

Birds are symbols of freedom, we all know. But what does that really mean? [*Pardon the interruption, but there goes another Chipping Sparrow.*] Freedom from want and worry, from the workaday routine of life? Maybe that's a part of it, but, for me, they symbolize, more than anything else, a freedom to think outside the box, to go beyond the arbitrary dictates of received knowledge and conventional wisdom. [*Two more Chipping Sparrows.*]

Say it out loud: "Summer migration." And: "The five seasons." You almost have to force yourself to do so. Those phrases don't exactly roll off the tongue. But those things are real. They're dynamic and exciting. They're thrilling and wonderful, and they're happening right now, in real time, on quiet nights and in buggy marshes all across eastern Colorado.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

I've already mentioned Michael Donahue's article. [*I just heard two more Chipping Sparrow flight calls.*] A few other resources that have helped me acquire a better appreciation of the fifth season, molt, include Steve Howell's *Peterson Reference Guide to Molt in North American Birds*, Peter Pyle's two-volume *Identification Guide to North American Birds* and Howell's two-part series, "All you ever wanted to know about molt but were afraid to ask," published in *Birding* in 2003, and available online: tinyurl.com/Howell-molt-part-1 and tinyurl.com/Howell-molt-part-2.

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