

Migration Summary May 1st to May 15th, 2019

By Sachi Schott



Magnolia Warbler. Photo by Sachi Schott.

The promise of April 30th, when several new species for the season were recorded, was fulfilled as the first half of May brought with it PIBO's best and busiest spring migration days to date! Warbler species have arrived on Pelee Island in abundance, and the week leading up to the annual Springsong weekend on May 11th and 12th was absolutely spectacular, with incredible migration activity observed by PIBO and by visiting birders.

Right from the start, May 1st brought a handsome male **Blue-winged Warbler** that was singing in the netting area first thing in the morning, and which was captured soon afterwards. Large groups of **White-throated Sparrows** were moving through the undergrowth, and flights of **Swallows** (mostly Barn Swallows, with some Tree and Bank Swallows mixed in) were feeding and perching on the west beach of Fox Point, out of the way of the strong southeast wind. The groups of **Myrtle** and **Western Palm Warblers** that were moving through the trees next to the water had to be observed carefully, as now and then something out of the ordinary would show up: a **Magnolia Warbler**, or a **Nashville Warbler**, or even a striking black-and-orange **American Redstart**.

From there migration accelerated, and the following week and a half brought a continuous flood of migratory birds that were being seen on Pelee Island for the first time this spring. The warblers were a highlight, with fourteen different species seen on May 7th, a particularly busy day. Cold, overcast, rainy, and windy weather kept birds down low, foraging close to the ground, which created an abundance of good bird-watching opportunities. In the netting area, PIBO's field staff were gifted with excellent views of **Northern Parulas**, **Chestnut-sided Warblers**, **Blackburnian Warblers** and **Bay-breasted Warblers** that were all feeding among the fallen branches and flourishing waterleaf that lined the sides of the net lanes. These species generally prefer to stay high up in the canopy, and under normal circumstances often all that is seen of them is the underside of their tail as they flit from branch to branch! On sunnier, calmer days, most warblers were seen travelling through the trees in the company of **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**. Other birds grew more common as well, and the first **Scarlet Tanagers** and **Baltimore Orioles** seen on May 2nd now have plenty of company, while **Ruby-throated Hummingbirds** frequently stop by to examine the colourful flagging tape PIBO ties to its mist-nets.

And, among the colourful and varied warblers and vireos that returned to Pelee Island for the first time this month, there was one year-round resident that unfailingly drew the attention of every birder: the humble **Red-breasted Nuthatch**. PIBO does not typically record many Red-breasted Nuthatches in the spring, and only a single one was observed in the spring of 2018. But last fall, a failed black spruce crop led to hundreds of nuthatches travelling farther outside of their habitual range than usual. More Red-breasted Nuthatches were seen on more days in the fall of 2018 than in any year since PIBO began its migration monitoring program, and now in 2019 it appears that those Red-breasted Nuthatches are retracing their steps northwards. Dozens were seen, with the highest numbers corresponding to those days when migration was at its peak. On May 8th, PIBO banded 80 birds – 32 of which were Red-breasted Nuthatches! They were so numerous that two even flew in through the open door of the banding station as PIBO's field staff were closing up for the morning. Some recently banded Red-breasted Nuthatches were recaptured over the following few days, showing that at least some of them were remaining on the island, probably temporarily. All have had low fat scores, and some of the ones that have been seen allowed observers to approach to within a few inches of them as they remain laser-focused on their search for food. They have been frequent visitors at PIBO's bird feeders, and are hugely appreciative of black sunflower and niger seeds!

The busiest day in the banding lab was May 9th, when 139 birds were banded. From there, the bird activity began to slow. Species diversity remained decently high, but the birds that were seen were not as abundant as before. The number of birds recaptured by PIBO experienced an uptick on May 14th and 15th, as birds that had been banded from May 9th to 13th, and which had evidently decided to remain on the island to rest and feed, ended up in the mist-nets for a return visit.

The high water levels in the lake considerably reduced the amount of shore at Fish Point, leaving less habitat for shorebirds, but PIBO still enjoyed a few good sightings. A **Ruddy Turnstone** was out turning over stones on May 1st, and the highlight was a pair of **Willetts**, seen sharing the tip with two **Forster's Terns** on May 2nd. Two late **Common Goldeneye** were still out on the lake on May 6th. On May 15th, a single **American White Pelican** was out swimming off the south end of Fish Point, probably wondering where all the beach had gone! A few of these impressive birds have been seen this season, but not consistently.

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On May 12th, PIBO hosted its annual picnic at the PIBO cottage on Stone Road. The weather was less than clement, but over 40 people squeezed together and managed to stay warm and dry indoors as they enjoyed the food and drinks provided by Suzanne Friemann (PIBO's Executive Director) and her partner Jeff Hasulo. We would like to thank everyone for stopping by, and for donating so generously! PIBO's migration monitoring and education programs could not take place without the support of Pelee Island's islanders, cottagers, and visitors.

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As the days pass by, the ground cover at Fish Point and around the netting area has undergone a gradual, seasonal progression: from Dutchman's breeches, to trout lily, to trilliums, to waterleaf... and now, poison ivy! The plants along the path into the netting area have begun to spread their leaves, so please be aware of them if you plan to visit. Standing water and mud are still prevalent, and rubber boots remain a must.

After enjoying a few days of full coverage thanks to PIBO's hard-working volunteers, the banding station is back to reduced hours. Nets will be open from 9 to 11:30 a.m. each day, except in cases of rain. Please keep an eye on PIBO's Facebook page for more updates!