



Blue-headed vireo. Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

Migration Summary

October 1 - 15, 2024

By Jamie Depolla

We tend to expect October to be a quiet month for birds. Hasn't the flurry of warblers, with their vibrant colours, mostly passed by now? Actually, quite the contrary is true: October is a crowd favourite of a month. Although the start of this October had one very clear trick up its sleeve –

such a palpable drop in temperatures that we lost track of the number of mornings when we opened nets and could barely feel our fingers – we were definitely busy with the birds.

Migration monitoring wasn't too overwhelming the first few days of the month. The first day yielded a total of 20 birds banded of 8 species, and 33 species recorded on census. A Brown thrasher and a Gray catbird were making themselves heard at the banding station. A nice surprise was seeing a beautiful osprey perched on a dead tree in the netting area.

Things really got moving on October 2nd. On one of the best censuses of the season we noted 50 species, including a myriad of warblers: a Nashville warbler, a Northern parula, an American redstart, a Magnolia warbler, a couple of Tennessee warblers, and many more. Who said warblers are MIA in October? Certainly not at Fish Point. But the real stars of the show that day were not warblers, but sparrows: the first Swamp and American Tree sparrows of the season, to be precise. Two individuals of the former were heard calling at Fox Pond, while one of the latter was seen flying into shrubs almost at the tip of Fish Point. Amazingly, another first-of-season was recorded that day: a Yellow-Bellied sapsucker, thumping its head on a tree on the western part of the beach. And things were just as exciting at the banding lab. Sumiko saw three Chimney swifts flying over the station. We banded 44 birds of 11 species, half of which were dazzling Blue jays! We also got lucky with a Sharp-Shinned hawk and a Gray catbird.

That bird craziness dwindled down on the 3rd. Forty species were noted at Fish Point on census, including a few Black-Throated Green and Yellow-Rumped warblers. The star was a late Red-Eyed vireo; so late Sumiko had me repeat myself after I told her what I'd seen. The banding total was one of the lowest of the season: 11 birds of 7 species, including a noisy and squiggly House wren.

October 4th was a day of unusual activity. Probably because we are nearing Hallowe'en? The migration of Red-Winged blackbirds was intensifying, and dozens were seen flying around Fish Point. The Blue jays incessantly dive-bombed into the forest, which I assumed was because of the strong Sharp-Shinned hawk presence, as the raptors were quite literally patrolling the skies. Two Gray catbirds were heard on census, and a Red-Headed woodpecker was seen flying around the tip! I had not one for a long while. And while the banding was quiet, with only 19 birds banded, Sumiko, astonishingly, saw an Indigo bunting in the netting area! A strange day indeed.

Things ramped up again on October 5th. As raptor migration still electrified the sky, a majestic Peregrine falcon was seen hunting at Fox Pond. But the two stars of the day were undoubtedly the first White-Crowned sparrow of the season, recorded hiding in bushes, and a very late female Rose-Breasted grosbeak perching on a tree on the western side of the tip! And the banding was nothing shy of great: we banded 61 birds of 10 species, including, amazingly, another White-Crowned sparrow and even a Swamp sparrow! What a day to be a bird lover.

The next few days were quieter, both on census and at the banding station. October 6th brought 34 species to the census, including a Purple finch, along with 11 birds banded of 7 species. October 7th recorded 36 species on census, including a Pine warbler and a late Yellow-Bellied flycatcher, as well as 17 birds banded of 8 species. The 8th had a great uniqueness to it: the first two Common loons of the season were seen flying westbound far in the distance from Fox Pond! Two yellowlegs circled above the pond; they unfortunately didn't get close enough to allow me to identify them further. Greater or lesser? The Beatles or the Rolling Stones? I also managed to see a pair of Northern parulas on census, just as I was thinking it was getting late for warblers. We banded 19 birds of 12 species, which counted a Nashville warbler, a Sharp-Shinned

hawk, and our first Yellow-Rumped warbler of the season in the nets! We were starting to wonder when would we ever band one.

With this noticeable drop in abundance and diversity, we were starting to wonder whether we were about to end up with a bird drought similar to the one in the first part of September. Little did we know that Aeolus, god of the winds, was about to bless us.

Indeed, north winds arrived on October 9th and 10th and gave us the birding of a lifetime. We recorded 40 species on the census of the 9th, including a suspiciously late Northern waterthrush at the pond and many other warbler species: Cape May, Tennessee, Nashville, and many more. Two American woodcocks were also flushed along the census route. At the nets, we reached a wonderful tally of 59 birds banded of 14 very cool species: the first American robin and Yellow-Bellied sapsucker caught in the nets; the elusive Lincoln's sparrow; and our first Orange-Crowned warbler of the season! That one took both Sumiko and I by surprise (well, mostly me).



Yellow-bellied sapsucker.
Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

And now, the big day of the season enters the ring. The final boss of migration monitoring. A day we noted 44 species on the census, including Dark-Eyed juncos, Yellow-Rumped warblers, and two White-Crowned sparrows. But that is not what I am referring to. Are you ready? We banded an astounding 150 individuals, coming from 12 species! Writing this still gives me goosebumps. I remember very dearly chain-banding the dozens of Golden-Crowned kinglets that kept falling

into our nets. We also banded our first the Blue-Headed vireos of the season! Not a bad morning, not a bad morning at all.

Although winds were blowing from the southwest on October 11 and from the northeast on October 12, the days were alike in terms of abundance and diversity: 42 species on census, including a few Palm warblers close to the tip, and 36 individuals of 12 species banded on the 11th, 35 species on census and 31 individuals of 12 species banded on the 12th. That day we the banded a beautiful beautiful Northern cardinal as well as a White-Crowned sparrow and a Nashville warbler.

The 13th tickled us with light rain all morning, and we made the decision not to band that day. Rainy days are usually not conducive to exciting observations at Fish Point, but that day, as I arrived onto the beach and put my binoculars against my eyes to scan the Lake Erie waterfront, I noticed four odd-looking Double-Crested cormorants. “Wait, no. Those aren’t cormorants,” I remember telling myself. This black-cap, white neck... Oh, here they are taking off! What a prominent white wing patch they boast. But that means... Yes! The first Red-Necked grebes of the season! What a pleasure to see these birds, lifers for me! I ended the census with 33 species and soaked, but those grebes made it all worthwhile.

October 14th gave us an incredibly quiet census, with only 29 species heard and seen at Fish Point. Nonetheless, another first-of-season showed up at the tip: a Green-Winged teal! It was flying northbound like its life depended on it, all alone too. At the banding station, Sumiko heard an American pipit flying overhead, yet another first-of-season! October had decided to be generous to us. We concluded the day with 30 birds banded of 5 species, most of them Yellow-Rumped warblers.

The last day of the season marked, coincidentally, the first day of our two newest long-term volunteers: Patricia and Kevin from the University of Windsor! Patricia had already come to volunteer at PIBO for a month in the spring of 2023 and was already perfectly familiar with all the protocols in place. We managed to log 37 species on census, including an Eastern bluebird and, surprisingly, a Tree swallow! To say I was surprised would be an understatement: hadn't they already all passed through in August? According to Sumiko, some populations migrate very early on in the fall, while others come around mid to late October. But the real deal of the day came at the banding station: we achieved 115 birds banded of 9 species, the second-highest record of the season coming only five days after our highest tally! Apart from the plethora of Ruby-Crowned and Golden-Crowned kinglets, we banded two splendid American robins!

I will end by saying that the beginning of October was probably our busiest period of the migration season so far. The temperatures noticeably came down, and with them the birds into the nets. Some of those days, for example the 10th or the 15th, we could barely conduct observations at the station as we were so focused on banding! Next week we'll have Patricia and Kevin help at the station, so let us all hope they get to experience even more ornithological craziness as we enter the spooky part of the year!



In nearly 20 years of banding experience, Sumiko has mastered the art of "skulling" or looking at the ossification stage of a bird's head to determine its age. Photo by Jamie Depolla 2024