



Brown creeper. Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

Migration Summary

September 16-30, 2024

By Jamie Depolla

If the first half of September seemed to shape itself into a decreasing exponential curve, with a dazzling beginning and a stumped ending, the second portion appears to have chosen the opposite route. A slow and steady start out of the blocks led to a finish worthy of being described as the apotheosis of migration. The best part of it was the latest addition to the incredible team of migration-monitoring biologists: our long-term volunteer Shannon, coming to us all the way from Vermont! We were excited to have another bird aficionado join us for a couple weeks.

September 16 to 19 were quiet migration days. We achieved tallies of between 9 to 20 birds banded each day. Warblers were noticeably less abundant, and our censuses recorded between 32 and 42 species. However, raptor migration was going stronger than ever: Northern harriers gliding towards South Bass Island. Merlins relentlessly tormenting European starlings at the fox pond. Sharp-Shinned and Cooper's hawks flying around Fish Point by the dozens.

Have you ever wondered how to differentiate the two *Accipiters*? Legends – well, science – say that Sharp-Shinned hawks are smaller and have a more squared-off tail than Cooper's, but these details are hard to accurately notice in the field. One trick: the head of the Cooper's hawk will tend to protrude past the wings in flight, while that of the sharp-shinned hawk will appear lined up with its wrists! Now you can go and try it out yourself.

We managed to band a beautiful male Sharp-Shinned on September 17. September 18 saw us band a Wood thrush and a Tennessee warbler, while we had a House wren and a Nashville warbler on September 19. These birds were little sparks of excitement in days that felt long and quiet, and we were still longing for a change of pace.



Shannon helping out on census. Photo by Jamie Depolla 2024

Well, September 20 was that day. Census yielded 45 species; the highest diversity recorded at Fish Point since the 11th of that month. Bay-breasted warbler, Blackpoll warbler, Cape May warbler, Black-Throated Blue warbler; despite the southeastern winds, it seemed there was a party in the air. Because those warblers were not the stars of the show. Indeed, two species absolutely emblematic of Fall decided to show up together: Golden-Crowned and Ruby-Crowned kinglets! We were ecstatic: the arrival of a few of these bubbly, acrobatic passerines meant vast numbers of them were about to grace our presence very soon. At the tip of the reserve's beach, I also saw a Ruddy turnstone forging among the gulls! And the party was not over yet. Once I got back from census, Sumiko dropped some immense news: she had heard the first White-Throated sparrows calling around the netting area! Like the kinglets, these well-known ground foragers who let themselves be known in the Fall by their tendency to congregate in bushes and shrubs

and vocalize as loudly as they can. Although we banded only 11 birds of 5 species that day, we were surprised to get our hands on a late migrant Yellow-Bellied flycatcher!

September 21st was a two-sided experience. Census gave us no less than 46 species at Fish Point. And not just any species! A late Wilson's warbler, as well as a beautiful Northern parula made themselves known during the hour-and-a-half walk around the trails. But the biggest surprise came from Fox Pond. As I was posted in front of its waters, I caught two terns flying high in the sky. Wait, no. Those were not terns. As they circled closer and they finally landed in the pond. Shorebirds, without a doubt. Quick, my binoculars! I get a good, prolonged look at the birds. Yes, it had to be: Greater yellowlegs! I hadn't seen any all season. I ended census very happy that day.

When I got back to the banding station, I found things weren't as exciting. It was quiet, to say the least. We ended the day with a mere seven birds banded. Nonetheless, a flashy, obnoxiously beautiful Blue jay chose to get into the nets for the first time this season. Handling that animal was such a precious experience, as I often think of it as my alter ego in the bird world.



Blue jay. Photo by Jamie Depolla 2024

Diversity dropped the following days. Thirty-seven species for September 22nd's census, with notable appearances from a Northern waterthrush and a Chimney swift flying over on east shore. Fifteen birds of 5 species were banded, with a common yellowthroat in the lot! September 23rd was so rainy we couldn't open nets, but Sumiko saw 37 species on census. September 24th appeared to be a repeat of its predecessor, and rain was pouring down in the morning. Census still yielded an impressive 39 species, among them Blackpoll, Yellow-Rumped, Wilson's, and Bay-Breasted warblers. But the real star that day was our first Brown creeper of the season! At the tip, not only did we count 18 sanderlings, but also around 10,000 Double-Crested cormorants, our highest tally of the season so far! They were completely filling up the sandbank past the tip of the island.

As we ended census, a short lull in the rainfall led Sumiko, Shannon and me to try to open some nets. That experience was short-lived. Just an hour after we set up the pliers, bags, bands, folders, envelopes, and nets, our aquatic nemesis started dropping from the sky once again. Ah, the joys of banding. We ended the day with a single Black-Throated Blue warbler banded. But that gorgeous, unapologetically blue bird made it very much worth the walk into the forest that day.

September 25th gave us a plethora of birds on census, with a remarkable 45 species registered at Fish Point. Among those, Black-and-White warblers, American redstarts, Magnolia warblers, a Northern waterthrush, and a Common yellowthroat decided to show off their acrobatic foraging skills. At the beach, I saw a juvenile Black-Bellied plover foraging alongside a Ruddy turnstone and a sanderling, like the shorebird equivalent of a cliché American movie's action trio. Banding was also enjoyable, and we managed to band 17 birds of 7 species, including our first White-Throated sparrow and Brown creeper of the season!

The following days kept riding the diversity wave. We recorded 46 species on September 26, with notably a few warblers, two Eastern phoebes and 14 yellowlegs migrating high up! But the real showstopper was at the banding station: none other than a Golden-Winged warbler decided to take a plunge into a net on this wonderful morning! Of course, I was on census. And of course, it would have been a lifer. And although we banded an impressive total of 42 birds that day, I kept wishing for the remaining 41 to be Golden-Winged warblers. Alas. On other news, Sumiko and Shannon heard the first Dark-Eyed juncos of the season in the netting area! Fall indeed is upon us. That day also marked, sadly, Shannon's departure from Pelee Island. She is headed back to Vermont for her next adventures. We hope to see you again, Shannon!



*Can you spot the black-bellied plover?
Photo by Jamie Depolla 2024*

September 27 had a surprise for us: wind. But not just any wind. 40 km/h wind with gusts up to 70 km/h. I was nearly shoved into the water trying to count gulls at the beach. I still managed to find 39 species, including the first Rusty blackbirds of the season! They were hanging out in a dead tree by the pond along with their favourite cousins, Red-Winged blackbirds. I saw a Common nighthawk flying around the pond, which utterly surprised me. What was it doing awake at this time of the day? At the beach, I also saw 17 Red-Breasted mergansers land in the water! As you might expect with winds that strong, we kept nets open for only two and a half hours before deciding it was getting dangerous to let birds tangle themselves up in these conditions. We still ended the day with 23 birds banded, with two Winter wrens and a Song sparrow. Sumiko also heard, amidst the windy chaos, the first Eastern towhee and a Chipping sparrow!

Remember how earlier we said that the ending of this migration period would be similar to the very beginning of the month? Well, here it is. September 28 had a rock-and-roll flavour. Yes, we registered 42 species on census. Yes, we saw Rusty blackbirds, and Palm warblers, and Dark-Eyed juncos. But that was not the craziest part. We banded- get ready for it – an incredible 64 birds of 14 species! It was so busy we had to close nets 7 to 10 for a while, to give us time to breathe and ensure the birds' safety. A Gray catbird got itself a little aluminum ring that day.

Unfortunately, that sparkling enthusiasm was cut short by rain on September 29th, which meant only census was conducted. We saw 40 species at Fish Point over the hour-and-a-half, and excitingly, a Northern parula and Nashville warbler were still around!

And, of course, the best was saved for last. September 30 decided to honor us with the immense, sheer beauty of migration. Although census registered 36 species, which is slightly less than its predecessors of the month, a majestic Peregrine falcon was spotted on top of a dead tree, munching on what appeared to be an unlucky passerine. Furthermore, a Cape May warbler was caught hovering around some bushes at the tip area. But the real deal was back at the banding station. Northward winds along with just the right temperature following a rainy day made for the perfect banding cocktail: 71 birds of 15 species, the season's third best tally! An Eastern phoebe, two Hermit thrushes, and two very, very late Yellow-Bellied flycatchers stole the show.

As you can see, the season finale of the PIBO migration monitoring was quite an intense plot twist. And as we turn our attention to October, only one question remains: will the month of orange-and-red-coloured trees keep providing us with ample birds to watch, measure, and help protect? Or will the month of Hallowe'en choose to play spooky tricks, and guide birds on their migration journey everywhere but over Pelee Island? We certainly hope for the first option. In the meantime, we will keep monitoring birds as our proud duty; and baking pumpkin pies like there's no tomorrow.

