

Spring is in the Air and in the Sky

By Tom and Carlyn Jervis

Temperatures are rising and the snow is melting even in the shady spots. American Robins and House Finches have already been singing for weeks and the buds are starting to swell on the shrubs and trees. The Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese are leaving their wintering grounds at the Bosque del Apache and the Red-winged Blackbirds are reclaiming the marshes long before the reeds start to turn green. There can be no doubt that Spring is on its way. By the end of this month the Turkey Vultures will be again soaring over northern New Mexico and Say's Phoebes will be conspicuous. In another month, there will be birds singing everywhere and some will already be nesting.

The coming of Spring is always a joy with its promise of renewal and new life, but for those of us who follow the birds—figuratively if not literally—it is also a reminder of the wonder of migration. More than any other class of animals, birds have evolved to take full advantage of the planet's seasonal shift of daylight and temperature by moving with the seasons to optimal habitats for breeding where high-protein foods are available to feed their young. At the extreme are birds like the Peregrine Falcon, some of which complete a 20,000-mile round-trip migration each year from the rich summers and abundant food of the high arctic to a comparable wintering ground in South America. But even some of our resident birds like Mountain Chickadees and Juniper Titmice move up and down in elevation to take full advantage of the changing seasons.

The earliest migrants are the long-distance ones, those that nest in the most northern latitudes that pass through New Mexico as they follow the warming weather. In the eastern plains, shorebirds like Least, Western, and Semipalmated Sandpipers will be heading to the arctic to breed, while others like Violet-green Swallows and Western Grebes move up from the south to the northern United States and central Canada.

Large flocks of American Robins are often conspicuous in March. Although we have some robins in the area all Winter, you may notice that as these flocks come through there are variations in their coloration. Some of this variation is due to birds molting into fresh plumage in the Spring, but many of these robins are birds that spent the winter farther south and will be nesting well to the north of New Mexico. Birds have a high level of site fidelity; they return to the same places—sometimes even the same trees—to nest year after year. This results in geographic isolation of different populations of birds, and the workings of evolution can result in geographic variations in coloration. Although exceptions occur, in general southern and western robins are paler than eastern and northern populations—and have less conspicuous white spots in their tails. Some of the darker robins that we see in March may be headed far to the north and east to breed.

At the Randall Davey Audubon Center, some of our winter guests such as Dark-eyed Juncos, White-crowned Sparrows, and Red-breasted Nuthatch will be starting to head north or moving up in elevation by late March. April will begin to see real change. Birds that nest at the center, including Black-chinned and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Ash-

throated Flycatchers, Warbling Vireos, Western Tanagers, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and several kinds of warblers will be among those arriving in Santa Fe to reside here for the summer.

By early May, migration will be in full swing, and the combination of the movement of birds that winter in New Mexico, those passing through, and those arriving for the summer will peak. All across New Mexico, the annual International Migratory Bird Day on May 10th will see bird counts being conducted county by county across the state. These counts, like the more well-known Christmas Bird Counts, are an opportunity for citizens to provide scientific data that is combined by Audubon and Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology to provide a broad-scale view of the status of birds across the continent. Indications of early migration are among the results of these counts. In New Mexico, counts are organized by local chapters of Audubon. Beginners are always teamed with more experienced birders, so don't be shy about participating in these fun—and important—events.

The wonder of migration reminds the observant of the coming of Spring, the delight of bird song and the renewal of the natural world. It also provides us with a grand view of the subtleties which evolution has constructed in the natural world and a cautionary tale for the changes we are imposing on that world. For many species, this migration is happening earlier, by several weeks in some cases, driven by a warming planet. As warming is not uniform across the globe, some birds may find themselves out of synchrony with the peak of food supplies to fuel their migration or to feed their young on the breeding grounds.

As the birds return in the spring, they remind us of our obligation to the planet that sustains us all. Audubon's work to protect birds and other wildlife, whether it is getting young people out-of-doors, counting migrating birds, or advocating for sound conservation policy, is working to preserve the ecosystems that support all life on earth.