

Wild Bird Habitat Store

April Newsletter - 2024

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It's SPRING
BIRD MIGRATION

April's Bird Notes:

- Bluebirds will begin nesting in earnest.
- Male Goldfinches will be showing their breeding plumage.
- April is shore bird migration and the beginning of the songbird migration.
- Many of our winter visitors will be gone by months end.
- Time to prepare for orioles, April 16th, and Hummingbirds, May 1st
- Make sure to keep a field guide nearby. New birds will be arriving for the summer and many others passing through. It's an exciting time for birding.
- Install wildlife plantings now to provide future food and homes for our birds.
- Take advantage of some exciting bird watching during migration at a local wildlife sanctuary, nature center, city park, or your own backyard.
- Make a point to take a friend or a child on a bird walk. Take your binoculars and point out some birds you see. Share the vision. It will make a world of difference.

When we think of a sparrow we first think House (English) Sparrow, not a true sparrow at all. But Nebraska is host to as many as 26 native sparrow species. Each is unique and are more than just another 'little brown bird'. Native sparrows are worth a second look and you may get a glimpse of as many as nine native sparrows right in your backyard. So if you see a little brown bird scratching the ground under your bird feeder, don't just pass it by looking for the bright red cardinal, canary yellow male goldfinch, or the laddered white and black back of a woodpecker. Get you binoculars and take the time to explore that little brown bird. You'll be pleasantly surprise by their wonderful field markings, adding a new bird to your life list.



The Chipping Sparrow is one of our more common native sparrows occurring across North America, but often one of the least recognized birds that we have in our yards each summer. These little birds are often mistaken for a Tree Sparrow which visits us in the Upper Midwest and Plains States during the winter months. But the "Chippies" have a shorter tail than the Tree or Song Sparrows and are just slightly larger than a Chickadee. Adults are 4.5" to just under 6" long weighing in at 0.4 to 0.6 ounces. But it is the rufous cap on top their striped heads that adds a dash of color making the adult birds fairly easy to recognize.

Chipping Sparrows are common around treed areas foraging in the open on the ground. You will find them in a variety of areas such as grassy forests, woodland edges, city parks, and tree lined backyards and in shrubbery. They seem to prefer nesting in evergreens when these trees are available but will also use deciduous trees. If you check the evergreens in your backyard you may be surprised to find a nesting pair..

The male arrives first in March or April and sets up his territory with the female following a week or so later. As with most songbirds, they migrate at night and can often be seen in flocks of thirty to fifty birds. Once the male has established his territory he begins to sing his trill song of chipping notes that resembles more of an insect. It is unmusical and seldom recognized by most of us. Their courtship is brief as they readily mate and begin nest construction. The female Chipping Sparrow

Over a 3 to 4 day period the female will build a little grass nest which is extremely tidy from 3 to 10 feet above the ground. The male is often present guarding the female. Staying near he seems to cheer her on with much singing as she knits the grasses into a cup shape. She will then neatly line the interior with hair. They like black horse for some reason and if you check their nests you may find that she somehow came up with some. The completed nest measures about 4.5 inches across and 2 inches deep.

The female will lay from three to five pale bluish eggs which are spotted on the larger end. She will incubate the clutch of eggs for eleven to twelve days. After they hatch it will be another seven to ten days before the nestlings fledge from the nest. They will fly clumsily around the branches for several days before gaining the confidence to venture out into the open. The parents will continue to feed these young birds for another three to four weeks. It is not uncommon for Chipping Sparrows to have two broods a season.

Chipping Sparrows primarily feed on the seeds of many grasses and herbs. They will also eat small fruits and berries. During the nesting season a large part of their diet consists of protein-rich insects which they will continue to feed on most the summer. During the summer the male Chipping Sparrow will defend his territory against other Chipping Sparrows yet tolerate other bird species as long as they do not get too near the nest. After the nesting season is over the Chippies will begin to form flocks of several dozen birds foraging together among the grasses or at bird feeders. This usually is in September as they go through their post nuptial molt and prepare for migration. On their spring return they will have a partial molt as the adults don their breeding plumage. The flight pattern of Chipping Sparrows is only slightly undulating and more of a straight, energetic flight.

Chipping Sparrows are a resident bird in the Southern U.S. and Central America. Those that breed in the upper latitudes of North America are short distant migrants wintering from Baja California through Mexico and into Florida. Their population remains healthy as they thrive in open tree filled spaces which are common landscapes in many backyards and parks.

So listen for the chipping insect like call of the Chipping Sparrow and you will soon recognize it everywhere. It's petite size and tidy appearance will certainly make it one of your favorite backyard birds.

Wingtip: Hair Bird? Once horses gave way to automobiles, the Chipping Sparrows had to switch to other types of hair to line their nests. Although the nickname of "hair bird" went the way of the horse and carriage, this sparrow still seeks soft hair to line its nest — now mostly from deer, cows, and smaller mammals. It is The female introduces the hair into the nest in a very organized circular method. To do such work would be hard for us to replicate.



Often when you mention the bird sparrow to someone, they commonly think you are referring to the English or House Sparrow. Yes, it falls in the category of 'a little brown bird' that scratches along the ground, moving about, looking for food. These LBB's may appear to be non-descript at a distance. but if you pay attention to their individual field markings, you will be fascinated by them, except for maybe the House Sparrow.

First, what about the House Sparrow? Well, the House Sparrow (*English Sparrow*), is a bird species that was introduced into North America in the 1850's, and by 1900 was the most populace bird in North America. It is a relentless enemy to many of our native cavity nesting birds. Apart from outright killing some native bird species or their young, they often drive off native nesting birds to take over the cavity. These so-called 'sparrows' will even construct their own nest atop the eggs or chicks of the host bird. They are not to be encouraged. A good reminder of how introduced species can disrupt our natural communities.



But wait! I said 'so-called' sparrows. The House (English) Sparrow has been around for over 150 years since it was introduced into North America, much longer than any existing human. That is why many people may believe it to be a native bird. But in fact, it isn't even a true sparrow, but a weaver finch.

Wingtip: So, you see a little brown bird scratching the ground under your bird feeders. Did you know at a distance you can tell if it is a House Sparrow or a native sparrow just by watching them. House Sparrows will sweep the ground with their beak to turn up seeds, whereas all native sparrows scratch with their feet similar to chickens to turn seeds up. So, if you do see a little brown bird scratching the ground with their feet it's worth the time and effort to identify that bird. It is no doubt one of our native sparrows and a look at its field marking can help determine which species it is.

There are 26 native sparrow species found in Nebraska. Some are migrating through; some visit us in the winter while others arrive to nest. Although only a few are attracted to bird feeders or can be found in urban areas, others are found from grasslands to woodland edges, wet meadows to woodlands.

Those native sparrows to look for around bird feeders, especially in the fall and spring, are:



White-crowned Sparrow – These sparrows visit our area between fall and spring, moving into the northern tier states and into Canada to nest. A beautiful bird to see. They can easily be identified with the charcoal black and pure white stripes on the crown of their head. If the white appears more brownish with the black, they are younger birds.



Tree Sparrows – A sparrow often seed around bird feeders during the winter moving into the northern Canadian tundra during the nesting season. They have rusty caps and rusty colored eyelines on a gray face. Look for the single dark spot in the



White-throated Sparrows – A beautiful sparrow easy to identify due to the black and white stripes on the crown, white throat patch, and bright yellow lores between the eyes. They spend the winters in eastern Nebraska migrating throughout the state to Canada during the nesting season.



Song Sparrows – They are one of the easier sparrows to identify. Besides their melodious song, they have heavily striped breasts that converge in the center. A brown crown that has a gray stripe in the middle with gray eyebrows and cheeks. The body is mostly a rusty brown with gray streaks throughout. Song Sparrows can be found in our area year-round.



Harris's Sparrow – Common under bird feeders from fall to spring in the Great Plains from Nebraska to Texas before moving north into Canada to nest. They are a sparrow first identified by John Audubon near Council Bluffs, IA and are only found in the Great Plains states. A large sparrow with gray on the sides of the head, black on the crown,



Dark-eyed Junco – A winter visitor from Canada often referred to as 'snowbirds' since they proceed the year's first snowfalls. Very common under backyard bird feeders during the winter months. Easily identified with the dark gray back, white belly, pink bill, and legs.

Lark Sparrow – They have striking patterns on their heads of white and black streaks and a brown cheek patch. Look for a white eye line and white on the tip of its tail. A woodland edge bird that breeds throughout the Central Plains. They may be seen near bird feeders during the winter months.



Eastern Towhee – A large almost robin size sparrow with magnificent colors. They have black upperparts and on the breast with rusty color on the sides, and a white belly. Favors woody areas where they nest in Nebraska during the summer. If you have shrubs and trees, you may see them foraging in your backyard, rooting through leaves or picking seeds under the bird feeder.



Chipping Sparrow
Bird of the month in
April's Newsletter



Nebraska's Native Sparrows

- Swamp Sparrow - winter
- Vesper Sparrow - summer
- Savannah Sparrow - migration
- Lincoln's Sparrow - migration
- Fox Sparrow - migration
- Grasshopper Sparrow - summer
- Brewer's Sparrow - migration
- Clay-colored Sparrow - migration
- Green-tailed Towhee - migration
- Henslow's Sparrow - summer
- Lark Bunting - summer
- LeConte's Sparrow - migration

- White-crowned Sparrow - migration
- White-throated Sparrow - migration
- Song Sparrow - all year
- Chipping Sparrow - summer
- American Tree Sparrow - winter
- Eastern Towhee - summer
- Harris's Sparrow - winter
- Lark Sparrow - summer
- Dark-eyed Junco - winter
- Nelson's Sparrow - migration
- Spotted Towhee - winter
- Field Sparrow - summer

- Nelson's Sparrow - migration
- Spotted Towhee - winter
- Cassin's Sparrow - summer

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and a good buy

Although these 9 sparrows can be common visitors around backyard bird feeders, you may be rewarded by other native sparrow species showing up to forage under your bird feeders primarily in the spring and fall. But a walk through a prairie, woodland edge, or wet meadow may produce sightings of the other 17 native sparrow species you won't find in your yard. Identifying some sparrows can be a challenge as they fly and flit around. Download the free bird ID APPS from the Cornell Bird Lab on your phone or tablet. Just GOOGLE Merlin Bird ID and Audubon Bird ID APPs to help identify birds by sight and sound. On Merlin you can even snap a photo to identify a bird.

Wingtip: April begins the shorebird migration. Although identifying some shorebirds can be a challenge, the free APPs can help. Visit the wetlands and marshes. The mudflats around area lakes. Nebraska has at least 36 shorebird species that migrate through or arrive to nest. Some of these birds are headed to the high Arctic to nest. From ibis to godwits, avocets to snipes, yellowlegs to sandpipers. It is an incredible array of birds on a distant journey.

Dave's April Bird Chatter

The Snow Geese, Sandhill Cranes and many ducks have passed through on their way to their northern breeding grounds. There will be some stragglers left to enjoy, but it will be short lived as they head for the Canadian Boreal Forests.

Roughly 80% of North America's waterfowl breed in the Boreal forests of Canada, the largest intact forest left on earth with around 1.2 billion acres currently spared from modern industrial development. An amazing 35% of all North American duck, geese, and swan species nest there which is why Ducks Unlimited has joined the Boreal Forest Initiative to protect the Boreal Forest. But it's not just waterfowl. From shorebirds to warblers, cranes to many of our songbirds utilize this vast area as a nursery to raise their young. In fact, this Boreal Forest supports the greatest abundance of birds on the continent - with about 3 billion birds entering this region during the breeding season accounting for a total of more than 300 bird species, and over 5 billion birds emerge from the Boreal Forest after the nesting season.



Wingtip: Nebraska has more than 450 bird species on the state bird checklist. This includes our winter avian visitors, spring and fall migrants, our summer bird species along with our year round resident birds. Find out more at <https://birds.outdoornebraska.gov/>

Birds, unlike humans, have no borders or boundaries, and many of the birds we enjoy in the lower 48 states during the spring bird migration are headed to the Boreal Forest in Canada. Should we be concerned about the future of the Canadian Boreal Forest? Very much so. Learn why at <http://borealbirds.org>.

It was another exciting February and March viewing the Sandhill Cranes, a variety of geese, Trumpeter Swans, and the stunning beauty of the duck species that migrate through our area. We should be seeing Whooping Cranes, American White Pelicans, and more waterfowl as we head into April. But the spring bird migration is far from over.

April is one of the most exciting migration months of the year. We will once again welcome back many of our summer favorites to the backyard and beyond the backyard; the brown thrasher, catbird, towhees and chipping sparrows to name a few. The Rose Breasted Grosbeak and Orioles are two of the Neo-tropical migrants everyone enjoys welcoming back. But at the same time we will be bidding our winter friends a fond farewell by month's end until we see them return next fall. They entertained us all during the winter months and it was a joy to see them.



**Male & Female
Rose-breasted Grosbeak**

One of the most exciting events during the spring migration is seeing birds that are just passing through on their way north. About thirty species of warblers move through Nebraska such as the Yellow-rump Warbler, Palm Warbler, the stunning Black and White Warbler, the Wilson's Warbler, the list goes on. Several species of warblers such as the Common Yellow Throat and Yellow Warblers will remain to nest.



Yellow-rump Warbler

And there is always the opportunity to see warblers that get of course and appear in Nebraska such as the Hooded Warbler or Black-throated Blue Warbler, a real sight to see. But these vagrant warbler species don't stay long so keep your eyes open. Many migrating bird species on their way further north will only be stopping off for a short stay before moving on.

Swainson Thrushes are commonly seen as are Yellow-headed Blackbirds and dozens of other migratory bird species. Take along a field guide and binoculars with you wherever you go or download one of the free bird ID APPs on your phone. Even a short drive through the country to grandma's house can produce some exciting bird-watching results. And those backyards with a little mature habitat can become a haven for migrating birds. I always have my binoculars close at hand wherever I go.



Yellow-headed Blackbird

At the Wild Bird Habitat Stores we encourage everyone to have a field guide as you never know what bird may appear or when. This will even help you enjoy the spring migration period more as you identify these birds. It is fun to be able to identify these new strangers as they arrive or pass through. And before you realize it you will gain a great deal of knowledge about birds. Many folks call us needing assistance with bird identification. It is helpful if the caller has a guide as they describe the mystery bird. We are pleased to help as you identify these birds, adding another level of enjoyment to your birding experience.

By now you must have noticed the male goldfinches slowly donning their canary yellow breeding plumage for the summer months after a long winter. It will be May before the northern goldfinches that have been in our company all winter follow the dandelion blooms back north, leaving us with our resident goldfinches for the summer. By late June these resident goldfinches will move from urbanized feeding grounds into rural country sides to nest. Since they feed their nestlings strictly seed, they are late nesters waiting until there is a bountiful supply of seeds for their young. Those living in open rural areas will continue to enjoy flocks of these finches until mid-August when natural seeds like the native prairie thistles and sunflowers, a favorite of goldfinch, ripen.



Bluebirds will get serious about their nesting as the weather warms and the cool winds subside. They have been checking out nesting boxes and soon many bluebirds will have nests ready for the season's first clutch of eggs. But a cool rainy April could create wet nests and cold nestlings. This is just one reason if you have bluebirds to be sure you monitor their nest boxes. Many a well-meaning person will install a nest box without following-up to ensure the birds are safe and successful.

Opening and checking your on tenants, whether bluebirds or not, will not cause the nest to be abandoned. If you're not sure how to monitor you bluebird nest boxes Wild Bird Habitat can provide you with that information. You can also get additional information on attracting bluebirds at Blue Birds Across Nebraska's website: <http://bbne.org>.

The orioles will be arriving by months end. Just a reminder to make sure you have your oriole feeders ready by April 15. Just freshen the oranges, nectars, and jellies occasionally until they arrive. This is also a good time to be thinking about hummingbirds which will be arriving the first week or so of May. Attracting these two Neo-Tropical migrants to a feeder is all about timing. If you are ready for them before they arrive you have a better chance of attracting them early on.

That is not to say putting oriole and hummingbird feeders out past that date will be unsuccessful. Orioles begin arriving April 16 and will do so until June 5 with the half arriving between May 1 to 10. These records are documented by Dr. Paul Johnsgard, Professor Emeritus School of Biological Sciences, UNL. For Ruby-throated Hummingbirds the earliest reported sighting was April 7 continuing their migration until early June. The median arrival date, however, is May 5 to 17.

Are hummingbirds becoming accustomed to nesting in the Lincoln area. Several reports in recent years indicate folks feeding hummingbirds all summer long and bringing juveniles to the feeder. These are in riparian creek areas the reports come in from. The Ruby-throat does nest along the Missouri River and eastern Platte River

In spring we turn our attention to planting spring flowers and installing new landscape plants. Select those that will encourage pollinators and birds to visit your yard. Carroll Henderson's publication, "Landscaping for Wildlife" is designed for creating a wildlife habitat in our area. There are a number of UNL Extension NebGuides at janrpubs.unl.edu/ to guide you and inform you about planting for wildlife. Also check out the Nebraska State Arboretum at <http://arboretum.unl.edu/>. They have some great information as well as selling many native plant materials. Another useful tool is <http://audubon.org/native-plants>. Don't just landscape your yard, "birdscape" it.

The spring migration of birds is an incredible phenomenon that is unequalled by any wildlife on the planet. From the short distance migrants to those long range migrants, generations of bird species will return to their same breeding ground, often within a few hundred yards, year after year. Many male birds arrive first and wait for their monogamous mate to show up, sometimes several weeks later. Many will perform exotic displays to attract a new mate for the season.

Using the stars, sun, terrestrial landmarks, and electro-magnetic fields, they imprint these exact routes, which are from a few hundred miles up to more than ten thousand miles, on their young. In fact, it is the Arctic Tern that migrates the farthest from the Sub-Arctic to the Antarctic and back, a round trip in excess of 25,000 miles. It has occurred year after year for thousands, if not millions of years.

In the spring they don their bright breeding plumage and perform courtship rituals that are choreographed to perfection. Don't miss the opportunity to witness this incredible springtime event. Keep a good eye on your backyard for new arrivals but take the time to venture out to the many birding sites in your area. Remember...see to look and look to see. Nebraska is one of the premier migratory locations on the continent. At Wild Bird Habitat we have free guides and brochures to help you locate nearby birding sites, and we encourage you to enjoy the spring bird migration.

Attracting Orioles

Most birds migrate at night, spending daytime hours to forage for food and rest. When they arrive at a location in the early morning hours these birds are cold, tired, and hungry. The first thing they do is locate a source of food. This is why timing is important when attracting such birds as orioles or hummingbirds. You need to be ready for them and have the food in place prior to their arrival. For orioles, have your feeders out by April 15th. For hummingbirds be ready the week before Mother's Day, which is May 12th. You may need to refresh the nectar, jelly, or oranges once or twice before they arrive, but the effort will be well worth it. Variables, such as weather, may slow down their arrival. Locating these products in a shady area will help to keep them fresh longer. But remember, birds find food by sight. So make them easily visible.



Those most likely to attract Orioles are people in rural areas, or on the edges of urbanized areas with mature trees in mixed open areas. That is not to say folks inside cities cannot attract them as well. In urbanized areas, those who border open city parks or a commons area have the potential to attract these colorful birds.

If you're in an area and you're not sure if you will attract Orioles, simply cut an orange in half and spear it on the end of a branch. Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Catbirds, and Fritillary Butterflies will also enjoy it. You may even be surprised at who else stops by. But for those who have successfully attracted Orioles, they have found that grape jelly, not jam, will become their preference, and many have reported going through several pounds of jelly each week. The Orioles may drift away from the feeders while feeding their brood insects, but will return, often with their young in tow.

Also keep watch for the Orchard Oriole, a beautiful red-rust colored and black bird that will feed on the same products as the more common Baltimore Oriole. In Western Nebraska you may even attract the Bull-ock' Oriole. The Orioles will remain through the summer, with the females beginning to leave by Mid-August. The males will remain on their territory into Mid-September along with the juvenile birds before departing to the tropics

Dave's Summer Bird Feeding Recommendations

If anyone were to ask me what my recommendations would be for a good summer backyard bird feeding program it would consist of a caged seed tube bird feeder with hulled sunflower seeds. An Aspects or Droll Yankee seed tube feeder with Nutra Saff safflower seed, a hanging or post mounted platform bird feeder with safflower or Nutra Saff safflower seed. A ground feeder with safflower seed mixed with a little white Proso millet. A Nyger thistle seed feeder. And of course a suet feeder. These would be my primary bird feeders for the summer months attracting my favorite birds while reducing blackbirds at those feeders. I still offer in-shell peanuts on a separate platform bird feeder, a general wild bird mix on another and a peanut feeder for shelled peanuts. At these feeders it is first come first serve but always adds to the excitement in the backyard.

Attracting Hummingbirds, It's Fun! It's Easy!

- Have your hummingbird feeders out no later than the first week in May. You need to be ready before they arrive. It makes attracting them much easier.
- Hang your feeder in a partially shaded area. Direct sun can cause the sugar and water nectar mixture to separate and leak from your feeder.
- Hummers are very territorial and some will fight at a feeder. When this happens it is best to set up another feeder in another spot to stop the fighting. Locate a second out of site of the other feeder.
- A feeder should be cleaned thoroughly once a week in warm water and white vinegar to remove residue. A stiff bottle brush or hand-mop is useful.
- Avoid pesticides on flowers from where hummingbirds feed. They get their protein from small invertebrate insects gleaned from plants. The nectar only provides a source of energy.



Enjoy Summer Bird Feeding More!

Caged seed tube bird feeders are great for attracting Chickadees, Nut-hatches, finch, and woodpeckers.



Bird Houses

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huge selection.