

On the Wing

Fall Migration by Noah Poulos

Each year the late summer doldrums set in, and the realization that autumn signifies the beginning of the dormant period in our temperate region sinks deep. One aspect that defines Appalachian summers for me is color. The blazing of wild azaleas, staggering their blooms as you travel up the mountain. The brightness of a Tanager, making a mockery of those who dare to call a Cardinal “red”. The brilliance of a Red Eft, making its way across the forest floor during its brief stint on land. And while autumn is not short of color, it comes with a taste of loss, for when the leaves fall, it is a long time before our days again resemble an artist's palette. Not in summer though. Summer comes with an uninhibited sense of freedom and joy, accompanied by the sensory explosion of colors in every direction.



The group that I find myself searching for more than others, largely because of the joy that their colors evoke, are birds. Neotropical migrants make their way from as close as Cuba to as far as Argentina to find summer homes in the Appalachian hills. From March to May they arrive by the thousands, dabbing the sky and canopy with yellows, greens, reds, and blues. Their songs do to the ears what a beautiful painting does to the eyes—they reveal a work of art. For months these migrants utilize our natural resources and make it a better place all the while! They are the icing on the cake, the cherry on top of the already astounding Appalachian summers. However, October marks the first full month of autumn. It is the beginning of a transition in the soil, plants, and animals. The days get shorter and the nights cooler. The birds are still here, both residents and migrants. However, something has changed.

Walking along Swannanoa River-- one of my favorite spots to look for birds-- I cannot hear much. A chirp here, a squeak there. The songs have been tapering away. Sure, the Song Sparrow and Carolina Wren sing loud and proud on this cool morning, but where is the Indigo Bunting, the Orchard Oriole? Suddenly there is a flit in the corner of my eye. Quickly, I raise my binoculars to the tip of the sycamore branch and see an old friend-- a Palm Warbler. Though, he looks different. His chestnut cap, bright yellow breast, and brown chest streaks have all faded to



a dull yellow-brown. It's back has become a solid brown. For just a moment I don't even register it as the same bright yellow bird that showed up back in April.

Alas, my brilliant yellow summer companion has undergone a drastic change. There are several theories as to why migratory birds change plumage between breeding and non-breeding times. It could perhaps be energy conservation - it takes more energy to produce certain pigments than others. Also possible is camouflage. While the bright colors help attract mates in the spring, it would make them stick out to predators during their long trip south. This is still a debated topic; however, the reality remains the same that our avian companions become duller, losing their color just like the trees and the earth.

Birds don't all go unnoticed in their southbound pilgrimage, not by myself and other dedicated birders at least. Fall migration offers a challenge to birders. Familiar migrants blend in, looking more and more like one another as the days go by. There is a thrill to cracking this code. When you spot a migrant at this time of year, there is a sense of wonder, as you think to yourself that this may be the last of its species to have not left for the winter. And as the autumn months go by and new birds pass through and familiar birds take off, I watch their unbelievable journey take place, and I experience a freedom and joy, much like that that come with the colors of summer.

As October nears and summer turns to autumn, the light changes, the temperature changes, the colors change. Much as my energy fades as the clock ticks closer to bedtime, the earth and all of the life inhabiting it find rest all in forms of their own. Trees drop their leaves, mammals hibernate, birds lose their color and fly south. It is a necessary process, to recharge and rejuvenate so that life can continue to pop during the summer months. And with that I realize that autumn does not come with doldrums. The falling of the leaves does not taste of loss. These are times of change, and that in itself is exciting, rejuvenating. For as our home here in North Carolina turns to browns and greys, in the tropics our beloved migratory birds patiently await their spring return.