Blog spring 2024

A new season begins! - April 17

On April 15th, as dictated by protocol, a new Spring bird migration monitoring began once more at the Cabot Head Research Station, the 23rd season since the first year in 2002 and the 19th for your humble bander and blog writer. It was a beautiful day of sunshine and blue sky. After a dry and mild winter, there was not a hint of snow anywhere when the station was opened on April 12th. On April 15th, for that first day of monitoring, all 15 mist nets could be opened for the regular daily 6 hours, starting 30 minutes before sunrise. It was the same on the second day, with another blue and sunny sky. It changed rather dramatically the day after, however: overcast, strong East wind, and pouring rain precluded any banding and - to be honest - observations as well. As the time of writing, rain is continuing on, relentlessly.

With experienced help from a couple from Toronto, we banded a decent first day total of 33 birds of 8 species and, overall, detected 39 species. Totals increased to 50 birds (of only five species) banded on the second day and a total of 53 species detected. As expected, Golden-crowned Kinglets were the most abundant in our nets, notably on the second day with 37 birds (or, 74% of the total, to be precise). Dark-eyed Juncos (of the Slate-coloured form) and Brown Creepers were the other most captured, unsurprisingly. These three species migrate squarely in April, with a shifting timeline depending on weather conditions, sometimes early, sometimes late. On April 16th, we recaptured a Golden-crowned Kinglet banded… last fall, on the very last day of banding (October 31st): out of the 10,593 kinglets banded in 22 years, it is the first ever between-season recapture for this species at Cabot Head!

Mid-April is also migration time for quite a number of other species: on these first two days of monitoring, there was a good movement of Northern Flickers, blackbirds (Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds) and American Robins (over a hundred on April 16). A few small flocks of Canada Goose graced the sky with their typical ‘V’ formation; an emblem of migration if ever there was one.

The first warbler to be detected this season was a Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler caught at the end of the first morning. The following day, none were captured but a handful were seen and heard. No other warblers have been seen yet. April 16 was a good day for waterfowl: a few Common Loons flying fast toward the northern horizon over the bay; several Horned Grebes in resplendent breeding plumage sitting on Georgian Bay, with one Eared Grebe among them (still clothed in its winter coat though); it is the first ever Eared Grebe observed at Cabot Head! A few flocks of Long-tailed Ducks also flew by. In Wingfield Basin, we enjoyed the presence of a pair of Bufflehead and two pairs of Ring-necked Ducks accompanied by a lone Common Goldeneye. One Wood Duck and a pair of Mallard seen flying (at different times) as well as Red-breasted and Common Mergansers complete the list for that day.

On April15, a West wind picked up in mid-morning, providing easy lift to soaring raptors, notably Turkey Vultures. Excitement came in the form of two immature Golden Eagles soaring together over Middle Bluff, slowly drifting East and South, pushed by the wind, not before providing great views to all here. Later in the morning, three adult Peregrine Falcons flying together - and mobbing each other - were observed in the southern sky.

The Bald Eagles’ massive nest, in its sturdy poplar tree, has survived another winter. However, it seems that there are no eggs in it, no adult brooding the clutch: the two adults are observed often, either flying, or perched together, or visiting the nest, but no one sits tightly on it, as they usually do at this time of year. We are left to ponder why: maybe one of the pair succumbed during the winter and has only recently been replaced. It might take time for the newly formed pair to engage into breeding, not surprising for such a long-lived bird (20 to 30 years in the wild, with the oldest known Bald Eagle in the wild being 37 years old at time of death, a bird banded as a fledgling and killed by a car).

Now, we are left waiting for a return of more clement weather to resume the banding operations. At the moment, we are mostly hunkering down by the woodstove, under heavy blankets, trying to keep warm. No doubt the birds are trying to do the same (minus the woodstove and blankets!), unless they opt for the effective (but energetically costly) strategy of flying back South to wait out the weather.