

## Natural South Marysburgh

### The Butterflies of the Bird World

It was one of those days that birders often dream about. The previous night's rain, and the wind direction were all lined up correctly to create a morning fallout of migrating songbirds that produced a cacophony of bird song, representing at least 50 or more species. These birds had struggled through the night to reach Prince Edward Point, and arrived to find the tables set and the trees laden with insect larvae. Oaks, hickories, ironwoods and small bushes were seething with Yellow Warblers, Chestnut-sided Warblers and more Black-throated Blue Warblers than I can recall ever encountering before. It was a warbler jubilee and they were clearly the stars of the complementary stage show we had unexpectedly walked into one early May morning a few years ago.

In one corner of the Point Traverse Woods, Northern Parulas announced their presence with ascending trills that sounded more like coat zippers being yanked up rapidly on this still cool morning. These bluish warblers with breast patches that changed colours depending on available sunlight, had just arrived from Florida where they wintered only a few days earlier, having had rubbed shoulders with southern resident species like Bananaquits and Motmots only a few days earlier. As reluctant rays of sun warmed the air, Blackburnian Warblers shone through the emerging leaves like little bursts of sunlight. It takes sunlight to cause their orange throats to flame, but even on dull days, their colours still seem to break the morning mist.

These little mites are often dubbed the "butterflies of the bird world" and we are fortunate in this area to have more than 30 species. Most have come from their wintering grounds in southern United States, Mexico, Central America and Brazil, and will stay only a short while, before continuing north, many to the boreal forests to raise their young, before heading south again this fall. Others, like the Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided, and Black-and-white, may choose to stay put and set up house-keeping in the wooded area around Point Traverse and Prince Edward Point.

It is a spectacle that excites all birders, and it happens during the month of May. It starts slowly at first, with Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, Nashville, Pine and Palm warblers leading the procession, sometimes as early as late April.

The males arrive first, and they are the easiest to identify for newcomers to the ranks of the birding fraternity. Then, as the second week in May approaches, the race is on as the brilliant Magnolias, Cape Mays, and the soft browns of the Bay-breasted Warblers signal the start of the peak. Soon, it becomes a free for all as later arrivals, along with the females of all species, make their debut.

I recall zeroing in on a Mourning Warbler, its vibrant song catapulting from a dense growth of ground junipers and low shrubs. First it was a flitting glimpse, then nothing at all, as the late migrant melted into the shrubbery, but its voice was unmistakable. I heard it over the space of three days, but it never did reappear. It happens that way sometimes, and is why birders tend to become very sound oriented as that is often the only way to identify some species when they arrive.

By the end of the month, the tempo of the migration slows,

and by June, most are gone, leaving only the resident species to occupy this point of land. For a short while though during the year, this point of land in South Marysburgh sees not only birds from far away, but people from far off areas too. Licence plates bearing the names of adjacent States and Quebec mingle with local birders. Well over 200 species of birds may be seen here this month as the spring migration kicks into high gear. Among them will be the warblers passing through, most of them en route to more northern nesting grounds, along with thrushes, flycatchers and swallows—some content to stay, while others fatten up on insect larvae and keep migrating. It is a festival of birds and watchers of birds, all bustling around with a happy kind

of madness that the world could use more of today. Nowhere on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario do the concentrations of migrant birds compare with those at this point of land. In terms of abundance, it actually rivals Point Pelee. The annual Birding Festival and the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory have succeeded in putting this diminutive point of land on the map.



Yellow Warbler. — Photo by Garry Kirsch

Terry Sprague is a County field naturalist who lives on Big Island. His website on nature in the county can be found at [www.naturestuff.net](http://www.naturestuff.net) and he can be reached at [tsprague@xplornet.com](mailto:tsprague@xplornet.com)

Terry and Christie—

