

Guide to Spring Arrivals in Eastern Ontario

As winter gives way to spring, our bird-nerd minds cannot help but begin to daydream about the wonderful birding days soon to come! Here's a rough guide as to when some of your favourite bird species arrive back to eastern Ontario.

Late-February: Late-February marks the beginning of spring migration and the arrival of our first migrants here in eastern Ontario. Blackbirds such as Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles are on the move north. "Prairie" (*praticola*) Horned Larks arrive and set up territories. Ring-billed Gulls are spotted hanging around in McDonald's parking lots, eyeing kids as they walk by with french-fries in their hands.

Early-to-mid March: Birds of Prey come into focus around this time, with Golden Eagles, Bald Eagles, Northern Goshawks, Rough-legged Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, and Turkey Vultures beginning to make their northbound push. On lakes and rivers, as the ice breaks up and open water appears, waterfowl numbers begin to rise pretty much everywhere (especially so on Lake Ontario). White-winged gulls, Iceland and Glaucous, start to swell in their numbers along the north shore of Lake Ontario. Typically, the first Killdeer arrive along the north shore of Lake Ontario by mid-March.

Third-to-fourth-week-of March: All sorts of birds arrive in good numbers, including Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Saw-whet Owl, American Woodcock, Great Blue Heron, Eastern Meadowlark, and an abundance of waterfowl species. It is an exciting time of year for a duck lover, and indeed a great time of year for a goose lover! Greater Snow Geese are typically found in large numbers in extreme eastern Ontario during this time; their numbers continue to build to astonishing proportions over the following weeks. Rare geese lurk among the thousands of common geese, providing a classic "Where's Waldo?" challenge awaiting all those willing to accept it. Ross's Geese and hybrid Ross's x Lesser Snow Geese can be found among the Greater Snow Geese, and Cackling Geese are traditionally observed mixed in with migrant Canada Geese.

Early-to-mid April: Action continues to pick up as many familiar feathered friends arrive in eastern Ontario. Birds such as Golden-crowned Kinglets, Eastern Phoebe, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Fox Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Brown Creeper, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Northern Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Belted Kingfisher, Rusty Blackbird, Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, American Kestrel, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Osprey, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Sandhill Crane, Wilson's Snipe, Double-crested Cormorant, Trumpeter Swan, Tundra Swan, Bonaparte's Gull and Little Gull are typically observed throughout this period.

Mid-to-third-week-of April: Marks the arrival of many species of birds. Shorebirds such as Pectoral, Greater Yellowlegs, and Lesser Yellowlegs have arrived, as have the first warblers: Pine Warbler, "Yellow" (*hypochrysea*) Palm Warbler, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Pine average the earliest out of the three early-season warblers. Purple Finches, with their wonderfully musical songs, are most-welcomed arrivals at this time! Broad-winged Hawks begin their impressive passage northward at this time, as well. Swamp Sparrows begin to infiltrate the cattail marshes, with many migrants lingering in and singing from wet thickets. Virginia Rails, American Bittern, and Sora have arrived (with Sora the latest of the three to return) and may all be heard from the same habitat. Caspian Terns have arrived along the north shore of Lake Ontario at this time. Surf Scoter, Black Scoter, Red-throated and Common Loons are all on the move, too. Birds such as

Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-throated Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, and Brown Thrasher all arrive from mid-to-late April, as well.

Third-to-fourth-week-of April: Building numbers of swallow species are observed, with mixed-species flocks making for a delightful study of birds in flight. Look for arrivals of Northern Rough-winged, Cliff, Bank, and Purple Martin at this time. One species, in particular, that is very popular among eastern Ontario birders, is the Louisiana Waterthrush. This warbler arrives approximately two to three weeks earlier than its cousin, the Northern Waterthrush. The first of the vireo species, the Blue-headed Vireo, arrives at this time as well. Excited birders who are "pushing the season" (yes, that's right, I am talking about myself!) begin to look for Long-billed Dowitcher by the very end of April, with this beautiful and highly sought-after species being typically seen during early-May here in eastern Ontario.

Early-to-third-week-of May: Stems the most popular and thrilling period of spring birding. Countless warbler species; vireo species such as Yellow-throated and Philadelphia; sparrow species such as Grasshopper and Clay-colored; and thrush species such as Veery, Swainson's and Wood Thrush arrive at this time. The last of the herons appear, with Green Heron (early-May) averaging slightly earlier than Least Bittern (mid-May). The last blackbird to arrive, the Bobolink, first appears in early-May. Fan favourites, such as Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Indigo Buntings, Scarlet Tanagers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks arrive, delighting onlookers. Nocturnal birders will be listening for Eastern Whip-poor-will, which generally reaches eastern Ontario in good numbers by mid-May. Some roads throughout Prince Edward County (Babylon Road, for example) are most certainly some of the best throughout all of eastern Ontario for listening for this species at night!

Late-May: The latest of the springtime migrants to our area begin to pass through. Most shorebird species, cuckoos, Olive-sided Flycatchers, and the *Empidonax* flycatchers typically come to mind as characteristic late-season migrants. For the aforementioned bird groups, springtime passage usually peaks during the final week of May, with some groups, such as Shorebirds and *Empidonax* flycatchers, continuing to pulse through into early-June, even. Large flocks of Brant typically pass through in late-May/early-June, with the Ottawa River being *the* spot in eastern Ontario to take in excellent views of this species during their spring passage.

Happy Spring Migration in 2021!

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