

Why Do Birds Migrate?



Snow Geese at Bosque del Apache, 2011
Photo: Carol Leyba

I have been asked to write briefly (it's a huge subject) on bird migration. As I look out my window, two birds attract my attention. The Juncos (see earlier articles on most of these birds) are here in force. These birds arrive in number each winter in Eldorado. The other bird is the American Robin. If you are not from New Mexico, you probably think of the Robin's arrival as a sign of spring. Here in northern New Mexico, we have many more Robins during the winter, and I appreciate their splash of color against the drab landscape. Some Robins do stay here during the summer months and can be found usually around parks and golf courses. However, most head back north in the spring.

Migration is all about food—food for an individual bird to survive, and food sufficient to feed parents and quickly growing chicks.

Around the world, bird migration is generally along a north-south orientation, in keeping with the differing seasons in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. This is true for the routes from Europe to Africa and Asia/south islands/Australia as well as between North and South America. Here in New Mexico, many birds find the Rio Grande a convenient flyway. Thousands of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes crowd the ponds at Bosque del Apache, near Socorro, from November to March.

Of course, there are always exceptions. The Northern Wheatear spends summer in Alaska and north-

western Canada, then crosses the Bering Strait and makes a long westward flight across Asia, going to wintering grounds mostly in Africa.

The Arctic Tern is the winner for distance, traveling from the Arctic to Antarctic (over several known routes) and back, covering as much as 20,000 miles a year. They enjoy summer year round and live almost exclusively in daylight.

Out the window, I see my favorites who stay here all year, with perhaps just small movements depending on food availability. The Canyon Towhee pecks on my porch close to the door during inclement weather, and the Spotted Towhee in his dapper markings tries to be inconspicuous. A Curved Bill Thrasher pecks at the hard ground and also uses my suet feeder. A few doves hang around. Two favorite winter birds (with some staying all year) are the Western Bluebird and the Mountain Bluebird. Other winter birds here include House Finches, Scrub Jays, and Ladder Back Woodpeckers.

The "why" of migration is fairly simple, but the how is complicated and not fully understood. While there's no room in this text for a discussion of that, here's a brain teaser for thought. In the U.S., birds we know migrate here for breeding and chick-raising, and travel back to Central and South America for food to sustain them until they again head north. Is there an analogous phenomenon where birds that stay in the U.S during the summer for food, go to Southern Hemisphere countries for breeding?

—Pam Henline