

Introduction



What are migratory birds?

Have you ever wondered why you see different birds at different times of the year? Have you noticed that some birds appear in your yard in autumn or that large flocks of ducks appear on the lakes or ponds near where you live? Then in spring they vanish, not to return until the next autumn. These birds are called *migratory birds* or *migrants*.



Why do birds migrate?

Many migratory birds travel between North America and the Caribbean and back every year. They make these huge journeys so that they can nest and raise their young in Canada or the United States in spring and summer when the northern summer is at its peak, and insects and fruit are abundant. As fall sets in and the weather gets colder, there is much less food available. Sensing this change they fly south to spend the rest of the year in warmer places like the Caribbean where there is still plenty of food.

How do migratory birds find their way?



Once in the sky, migrants use landmarks on the ground (such as rivers, coastlines and mountain ranges), the position of the sun, stars and moon, and even the earth's magnetic field to help them find their way. Amazingly they can find their way to and from the same spots each year.

How far do birds migrate?



Some birds migrate only a few hundred miles, for example between the southern U.S. and the Caribbean or Mexico. Others like the Whimbrel or Blackpoll Warbler travel thousands of miles from their breeding grounds in the far north to their wintering grounds in the Caribbean or South America and can fly non-stop for four or more days. The Arctic Tern has the longest migration in the world. This champion migrant breeds in the Arctic and flies all the way to the Antarctic to spend the winter – a round trip of 38,000 kilometres (24,000 miles)!

How do birds prepare to migrate?



Migratory birds must *fuel-up*, that is, put on a lot of body fat in preparation for their long journeys. Whimbrels do this by gorging themselves on fiddler crabs before migrating north in the spring. Blackpoll Warblers put on so much fat by feasting on insects, caterpillars and berries that they may double their weight before they begin their long migration. By storing up fat for energy a long distance migrant like the Whimbrel can fly for more than six days non-stop!



What risks do birds face on migration?

Migration is dangerous and many birds do not survive the journey. They can die from exhaustion, bad weather, and collisions with power lines, glass windows or cars, or they can be killed by birds of prey or hunters. They seek safety in numbers. When traveling in large flocks they have less chance of getting lost or killed, and they save energy by flying in formation. Some birds migrate during the day but many migrate at night when temperatures are cooler, the air is calmer, and predators such as hawks are not around.

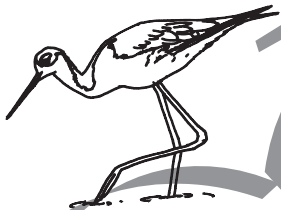
Do all of our migrants stay for the winter?

Many of our common birds are migrants. Some stay for the whole winter, relying on the food, water and shelter they can find in our islands for up to nine months out of the year. Others use our forests or wetlands as *staging areas* or *stopover sites*—places to rest and refuel on their way to their final destinations in Mexico, Central or South America. We also have *resident* species, birds that live in our islands year-round and breed when conditions are right. A few, like the Black-whiskered Vireo, are known as *summer migrants*, breeding in the Caribbean in the summer and flying south in the winter.



Why are there fewer migrants than there used to be?

Sadly, the numbers of many birds, especially migrants are declining. This is because the places where they nest, spend the winter, or stop to rest during migration are being destroyed or damaged when people cut down forests, fill in wetlands and pollute the water and land. It is very important to protect wetlands, beaches, woodlands, and forests and to look after the birds that come to our gardens and farms. Every year we think about this problem as we celebrate the miracle of migration during *World Migratory Bird Day* with special events across the region.



How can you help migratory birds?

Flocks of migratory birds are a spectacular sight and many people look forward to their arrival and departure at the same times each year. Find out what species are most likely to visit your island, learn about them, and keep a lookout for their arrival at the end of an incredible journey. Help them survive by providing feeders and water in your garden, planting native trees that provide food and cover for birds, and supporting protection of their habitats.

In September and October, bird migration is in full swing in the Caribbean. Thousands of birds pass through the islands or arrive to spend many months here resting, feeding, and sheltering in our forests, beaches, and wetland areas. The amazing journeys these birds take each year are celebrated in a festival called *World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD)*. Local organizations host a variety of events throughout fall to welcome home our migrants. These include guided bird and nature walks, presentations, art competitions, tree plantings, and more.

WMBD is a great way to get your school involved in raising awareness about the migratory birds that visit your island. Get in touch with your local non-profit or Environmental Ministry to see what's happening near you.

