



# ILLINOIS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

## Guest Essay

### Springs of a different feather: Watching Mother Nature

BY NICK MINOR

We humans love organization. We love identifying patterns and rules, themes and motifs, and understanding the cycles that envelop us. We like order and consistency, for example, consider taxonomy. Humanity has spent centuries (and continues today) refining and correcting rules and categories to be applied to nature. But very often--enough to keep scientists at the grindstone--we find nature doing something that has scrambled our brains. She breaks the rules.

This spring of 2013, we saw nature break down our organization of migration. We have determined an established order in which species are supposed to come through, a way birds are supposed to move with the weather, but thanks to a rather late-staying winter, all this was thrown to the wind. Wilson's Warblers influxed with waterthrushes, Mourning Warblers with redstarts, parulas with Blackpoll Warblers. And minds were indeed scrambled. Spring Bird Counts, normally catching a massive brunt of the migratory load, were relatively quiet in much of our state. April Big Days came up mysteriously short of what they had been in years past. Species variety in general fluctuated widely. Our systems of categorization broke down completely.

But it gets even better when compared with the spring of 2012. Even on an annual scale, this past spring of 2013 broke any sort of streak or pattern we could have dreamed up. With early heat in 2012 (exceptional on its own), birds migrated north far ahead of schedule, whereas in 2013, any birds that could have headed north a little early were barricaded by a line of cold, insect-suppressing air that covered northern and central Illinois. While species variety was great in some warmer parts of Illinois, even into May, many places in the prairie state had little more than Yellow-rumped Warblers and kinglets. That, my friends, is weird.

And all it took was some strange weather patterns. Kenn Kaufman once said, "Nature defies our every attempt to define and categorize it," and he was right. But this phenomenon shouldn't be looked at with irritation; nature gives us the power and opportunity to discover new mechanisms, perspectives and understandings ad infinitum. She compels us to keep learning by constantly defying our expectations. And let's not forget the birds specifically. This is the best part of the story. The birds adapted. They went with it. Birds genetically programmed to migrate at specific times to specific places changed to survive the challenges they faced this spring. Millions of years of adaptation, and here we see the beautiful intersection and balancing of nature's systems. The complexity of it all is mind-boggling. We are but tiny observers of one of the grandest cycles to ever exist.

The spring of 2013 didn't just teach me which birds moved when, or how to read radar and weather patterns, it also taught me a little bit about why I'm a birdwatcher. Moving forward, I appreciate a little bit more the kind of people who are birdwatchers. It's about the perpetual discovery that birds, and ultimately nature, empower us to make, and that, my friends, is priceless.

*—After telling his mom that he wanted to be an ornithologist at age 3, Nick Minor has been actively seeking new knowledge and experiences related to birds. He spent the summer of 2013 interning at the Field Museum and teaching about nature at Makajawan Scout Reservation.*

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