



Spring Migration



Returning Home in the Spring

Each year millions of North American birds return from their southern wintering quarters in South and Central America. The return of these birds heralds the arrival of spring and perhaps the most exciting time in a birdwatcher's year. At this time, large numbers of birds can be seen in fruiting trees, especially after inclement weather. Since they nest much further north, many of these transient species are only passing through Alabama.

The incredibly brilliant color patterns of these birds is sure to catch your eye as tiny jewels of yellow, orange, blue, and red flash amongst the new leaves of spring. The wildlands contained in Russell Cave National Monument provide an island of rest for tired northbound migrants.

A Variety of Migrants in a Variety of Habitats

Just east of Russell Cave, hardwood forest gives way to fields that support a different assemblage of migrants. Look for the handsome Indigo Bunting along the fence rows and look overhead for a variety of swallows.



Yellow Warbler/Bob and Martha Sargent

Warblers

Warblers are perhaps the most colorful of all of Alabama's birds. These small insectivores are an incredibly diverse group ranging from the chunky Yellow-breasted Chat to the smaller Yellow Warbler. The diversity and brilliance of their colors must be seen to be believed.



Yellow-throated Vireo/Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Mike Hopiak

Vireos

Vireos are similar in size to warblers but are not closely related. Vireos have more subtle color patterns of grays, greens, and yellows. They are distinguished from warblers by their larger, hooked bills and their face patterns of bright eye-rings or eye-stripes. You will often hear the incessant questioning call of a vireo long before you see it.



Scarlet Tanager/Walt Burch

Tanagers

Two species of tanager are found in Alabama. The males of both these species are striking red, while the females are yellowish green. Scarlet Tanagers are best told by their jet-black wings, a feature absent from the pure red Summer Tanager.



Wood Thrush/Walt Burch

Thrushes

Although thrushes are not as colorful as many other spring migrants, their glorious voices more than make up for their drab plumage. Five species can be found in Alabama during migration, all of which are separated by subtle differences in the spotting on their breast and patterns of their face.

Declining Neotropical Migrants

North American songbirds that winter south of the border are known as Neotropical migrants. Populations of these birds have declined in recent years for a number of reasons including:

- Birds are losing their habitat hemisphere wide—from the wintering grounds in the south, throughout their migratory areas, to breeding grounds in the north.
- As habitats are lost and become increasingly fragmented, threats to adult birds and their young increase.
- Migration itself can also be hazardous as these birds fly thousands of miles hoping to find enough food along the way to sustain their journey.
- Another major threat to these birds is free-ranging house cats which may kill thousands of songbirds each year. This has led to recent campaigns for owners to keep their cats indoors.