

ARE MIGRANTS ARRIVING EARLIER IN SPRING?

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In recent years, several birders have expressed opinions that birds seem to be arriving earlier in spring migration than years ago. It seemed to me this was indeed the case, but impressions are not facts. In an effort to put to rest my own impressions and perhaps that of others, I decided to do an analysis of the timing of migration based on records that I have been keeping since 1974.

My family and I reside in Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa County, Florida, a migrant trap at the end of a peninsula in Pensacola Bay. I had begun recording the presence of migrants daily since 1974. With some exceptions such as vacations or absences because of work, etc., I spent about 15 to 25 minutes daily during spring and fall migrations, walking a fairly standardized route in my yard and neighborhood. The presence of migrants as to species, as well as their relative abundance, was noted. Exact numbers, however, were not recorded. On weekends more time was spent in the field. This information was also gathered from Ft. Pickens, Escambia County, Florida, another migrant trap, and was supplemented by information obtained from other observers from both locations. In the spring of 1978, Lucy Duncan began operating a banding station which continued until 1985. In effect, our yard and neighborhood, known for being a haven for migrant land birds, has been well monitored since 1974.

Nine neotropical trans-Gulf migrants were analyzed to determine their frequency of occurrence in March, comparing the five year period 1975-1979 to the current period 1989-1993. In Table 1, numbers represent total aggregate days for the whole five year period when the birds were considered relatively abundant.

TABLE 1. FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE OF NINE NEOTROPICAL MIGRANTS IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE, MARCH 1975-1979 AND 1989-1993.

SPECIES	1975-1979	1989-1993
Red-eyed Vireo (<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>)	1.4 (0)	2.2 (0)
White-eyed Vireo (<i>Vireo griseus</i>)	4.2 (4)	3.2 (9)
Parula Warbler (<i>Parula americana</i>)	6.8 (3)	5.4 (8)
Black & White Warbler (<i>Mniotilta varia</i>)	.8 (0)	3.4 (0)
Hooded Warbler (<i>Wilsonia citrina</i>)	.8 (0)	4.0 (5)
Prothonotary Warbler (<i>Prothonotaria citrea</i>)	.8 (0)	4.4 (0)
Louisiana Waterthrush (<i>Seiurus motacilla</i>)	.6 (0)	2.8 (0)
Summer Tanager (<i>Piranga rubra</i>)	.6 (0)	1.2 (0)
Wood Thrush (<i>Hylocichla mustelina</i>)	.4 (0)	1.2 (0)

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As one can see from Table 1, seven species were more frequent and two less so in March. Although the White-eyed Vireo and Parula Warbler occurred fewer times, when observed, they were abundant more frequently. Most noteworthy was the Hooded Warbler, a species thought to be impacted by tropical deforestation and forest fragmentation. It has apparently been seen more often in March in recent years and in good numbers on occasion. In addition, since 1988, new all time early arrival dates have been established on eight species as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. NEW EARLY ARRIVAL DATES OF EIGHT NEOTROPICAL SPECIES IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE.

Species	Old Date	New Date
Blue-winged Warbler (<i>Vermivora pinus</i>)	29 March	23 March
Tennessee Warbler (<i>Vermivora peregrina</i>)	1 April	30 March
Blackburnian Warbler (<i>Dendroica fusca</i>)	25 March	24 March
Cape May Warbler (<i>Dendroica tigrina</i>)	4 April	29 March
Blackpoll Warbler (<i>Dendroica striata</i>)	12 April	9 April
Worm-eating Warbler (<i>Helmitheros vermivorus</i>)	25 March	17 March
No. Waterthrush (<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>)	5 April	29 March
Yellow-breasted Chat (<i>Icteria virens</i>)	31 March	17 March

What conclusions can be drawn from this data? A standard transect was not run nor was the amount of time spent afield or the number of observers consistent. This mitigates the information obtained somewhat. Further, in recent years the number of observers visiting Ft. Pickens and Gulf Breeze has risen considerably, possibly inflating the days of observations, particularly early in the season when many birders are out "jumping the gun." Still, Gulf Breeze and Ft. Pickens was monitored daily by the Duncan family and others during the late 1970's and it isn't likely many birds were undetected. This data were gathered to disprove my "impressions" but the result was a surprise, which certainly gives food for thought or further research. And what if this data is pointing in the direction of earlier migration? What would be the cause? On this point I would rather not speculate. **Robert A. Duncan**, 614 Fairpoint Dr., Gulf Breeze, FL

