

Animal Migrations in the Hill Country

When we think about the changing of the seasons, we usually think about the changing weather and the leaves of our native plants. But we also have a change in the fauna with the seasons as well. We don't have migrating bison anymore, but many things that can fly, also migrate with the seasons.

Here are some of the species that appear in the Hill Country in the fall to spend the winter with us and then leave in the spring.

The idea for this column actually came to me as I noticed, for the first time this year, a flock of pine siskins on my bird feeder. Pine siskins are related to goldfinches, but unlike the large yellow parts of the goldfinches, the siskins have only less obvious yellow bars on the wings and the base of the tail. They frequently are seen in large flocks and tend to be here today, gone tomorrow and back again later. They are very gregarious, eating both sunflower seeds and thistle seeds as well as whatever local grass and flower seed heads provide.

The American goldfinch has been an infrequent winter visitor to our yard, but is unmistakable as the male is bright yellow with a black cap, in contrast to the year-round resident, the lesser goldfinch in which the male is black on top with yellow underparts.

When we lived in New York and New Jersey, we viewed robins as harbingers of spring, but here they are fall and winter residents. They seem to move in small flocks, and apparently love cedar berries. They are also quite fond of our circulating water feature.

Another winter flocking bird is the cedar waxwing. They usually come in large flocks that all move together, as if one organism, while constantly talking to each other. They are distinguished as always looking so perfectly groomed with very smooth feathers and with a yellow-tipped tail.

The American kestrel, which we used to call a sparrow hawk, doesn't have to migrate far to come to the Hill Country as they breed in northern and western Texas, but are common here only in the winter. They are distinguished as looking like a miniature hawk about the size of a jay with a really short curved beak and distinctive black and white patches on the head. They can often be seen on telephone lines or hovering over a field looking for bugs.

Some of our summer residents include:

The scissor-tailed flycatcher is a spring herald as they arrive back in Texas in the spring. It is one of the most striking birds with two super-long black and white tail feathers (it's tail could be composed of more than two feathers) so that it looks like something that should be from the tropics somewhere.

Of our two resident vultures, black vultures live in the Hill Country year round, but the turkey vulture is likely to be here only in warmer months. Turkey vultures are unusual in the bird kingdom as having a sense of smell and therefore being able to find carrion by

smell. Black vultures often find food by watching the turkey vultures. They both perform a very valuable service to all of us.

Most bats migrate south in the fall and return, some of them pregnant females, in the spring when our insect population increases and the temperatures are right for them and their babies.

Most of our hummingbirds migrate to central and south America for the winter, some, amazingly, flying over the Gulf non-stop. They need to tank up for the trip, so our hummingbird feeders help them a lot in the fall. But the hummingbirds that nest here also need insects, especially to feed their families, so if you want to help them out, don't spray insecticide outside.

The most amazing migration of all belongs not to a bird or a mammal, but to an insect, the monarch butterfly. In the fall, usually in October and November, monarchs arrive in the Hill Country having flown in some cases from Canada and New England on their way to overwinter in the mountains of Mexico. We need to provide them with nectar-producing flowers then.

Then in the spring they return to the Hill Country, lay eggs on milkweeds and die and the caterpillars that hatch from those eggs grow, metamorphose into new butterflies and the process continues throughout the central US until the fall when a new generation starts the long trek back to Mexico. All of this by little insects!!

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.