

Time to talk about the birds and the bees Holyoke

Birds come to Maine to make babies. Lots of babies. They come up here merely to fornicate. Maine is an inviting place to raise a family, because we have an awesome supply of insects. Almost all warblers, sparrows and thrushes leave us and go south when the kids are raised and temperatures are dropping.

We're seeing the results of all that baby-making now. Fledglings are everywhere. Be alert for family groups. The chipping sparrows in my yard have been particularly reckless — at least half a dozen fledglings chasing weary parents all around me. Three young yellow-bellied sapsuckers — saplings? — are still following mom and dad around the treetops.

Even our year-round residents are getting into the act. Along the highway, look for crows in bundles of four to six. Ravens are in family groups of four or more. Blue jays, too. Watch for begging behavior.

Then there are the cedar waxwings. These wanderers make their babies in Maine, but then they may roam in and out of the state all year. They are gregarious, and winter flocks can number in the hundreds. Their presence is given away by the high, reedy notes they continuously whistle. Birds that fly in flocks routinely vocalize on the wing. It helps keep the flock together.

Cedar waxwings are always in flocks except for one time of year. That time is now. Anecdotaly, I see them in groups right up until the wild strawberries are gone from the roadsides. Then they pair up, disperse and start families. When I see and hear them now, they are only in pairs. As I write this, a pair just flew over me, whistling the whole way. They're about to make babies.

Courtship is a ritual. The male does a hopping dance



Cedar Waxwing.

and passes berries to his potential mate. If she's attracted, she will perform the dance and return the berry. The dances repeat until it's time to do the deed. The female chooses the nest site, but both mates build it. She incubates the four eggs for a couple of weeks while the male feeds her. Then they both raise the chicks, first by stuffing them with insects for a couple of days to build up their protein, then with regurgitated berries for a couple of weeks to build up their energy. Since the whole process takes less than a month, waxwings can start a family almost any time in summer.

Waxwings get the name from the colorful red secretions that adorn the tips of their secondary wing feathers. Goldfinches were the bait that got me interested in birds while I was in first grade, but it was waxwings that set the hook. As soon as I was old enough to ride a bike, I haunted the children's library in my hometown. Cedar waxwings were frequent visitors, eating the

berries in the mountain ash trees outside. A creamy color mix of yellow and gray, with a black eye mask, a crest, yellow tail tips and red wing tips — I wondered, how a bird could be that pretty?

Berry eating is what they do. Technically, they are frugivores, able to subsist on fruit for months at a time. They get most of the protein they need in summer, often hawking insects over fields and streams, snatching them in the air as acrobatically as swallows. Then, it's berries for the rest of the year. Flocks can roam as far south as Panama, looking for a good berry supply. In Maine's autumn, they are often seen in big numbers, wolfing down ripe fruit. Then, when those are gone, they leave for a while. They return in winter when some of the tougher ornamental berries and crab apples have been softened by frost. Waxwings can even get drunk on fermented fruit.

Berries provide the pigments for their reds and yellows. In fact, birds that grow

up in areas of honeysuckle develop orange tail tips.

In a few weeks, cedar waxwings will flock up again. As is their custom, they will land in berry trees right under your nose. The youngsters will have streaky breasts, a common sign of a first-year bird. Even the baby chipping sparrows traipsing around my yard have streaky breasts. Adult chipping sparrows are plain white underneath. Streakiness is Mother Nature's way of camouflaging babies until they are old enough to avoid predators without parental help.

Waxwings don't live long, so they need to make a lot of babies. In Maine, they came to the right place.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirding-trail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.

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I'd never tell you to do that. I meant the deer fridge in the garage!"

Alas, my mom doesn't have a deer fridge — maybe because I never get my deer, and she would have nothing to put in it.

But she did have a bat. In a cooler.

The next day, I delivered it to the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife headquarters and learned plenty of others have been having bat problems. When those bats are found inside living quarters, the department asks that people have them checked for rabies.

That's exactly what we did.

A few days later, I got another phone call.

A second bat was flying around in my mom's living room. As you might expect, she was far from impressed. Again.

My nephew answered her emergency call and managed to convince the bat to fly behind the chimney, where it absolutely, positively crawled back outside. (At least, that's what I told my mom.)

Meanwhile, I called Cory Mosby, the DIF&W's small mammal biologist, and asked for advice. Mosby explained that on hot days, bats that live in crawl spaces or attics — as we suspected these two had — seek cooler temperatures.

That often means they work their way into homes.

The problem: Our common little brown bat species is in trouble because of white-nose syndrome. And bats are good for us, no matter how much they might creep us out. They eat thousands of bugs and are an important part of our ecosystem.

Mosby said he'd been hearing about plenty of bat problems and said that although the department would prefer homeowners

use a patient approach, waiting until the baby bats that are nursing are able to fly — around Aug. 15, he said — then using "bat exclusion" devices to get them to find other housing, he understood that doesn't always happen.

"Since she's having them get into her living quarters, she can have them excluded at any time," he told me.

Mom liked that idea. I called an animal damage control agent and set up an appointment. He told me getting rid of the bats might be tough. When I told him there apparently had been a colony in her crawl space — bats in the belfry, if you prefer — for several years, he said the job might be even more difficult.

Keeping them out, he said, was easy, if you could find out how they're getting in. Getting a colony out? That's a whole different story.

That didn't matter to mom. In fact, if she'd been able to find a black market nuke that selectively targets only flying mammals, she would have bought it in a minute.

We were in a me-or-the-bats situation. Not good.

So yesterday, the nuisance wildlife expert showed up for a walk-around. He couldn't pinpoint an entry point the bats used. Nothing.

Then he stuck his head up into the crawl space, which I had told him must be full of the critters.

There were no bats. No bat droppings. Nothing.

So now we wait, just in case, and hope for the best.

But I'm still expecting the worst.

In fact, soon I'll make another phone call.

I've got to make sure my sister makes sure the ice box is full of ice and that she knows where her bat-handling gloves are.

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Sturgeon

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swimmers and sometimes struggle to fight their way upstream through rapids.

"I was very impressed that sturgeon were able to swim over the Great Works rapids, because if you've seen [those rapids] from shore or gone over them in a canoe, they're kind of intense," Johnston said. "It was kind of cool that they were able to swim upstream through those rapids. We can't say at what level of river discharge those two individuals made it over those rapids. That's something that potentially future tagging efforts could help us identify, if there are other individuals going up there."

At the present time, more than 30 Penobscot River sturgeon have active acous-

tic tags — Zydlewski said the team is seeking funding for more of the tags so they can gather more data on fish movements.

In past research, the team has identified more than 1,000 sturgeon wintering in the river.

The radio receivers that were in the river over the winter were retrieved in the spring, and data could be retrieved from them at that point.

"Over the winter, that was the anticipation — of waiting to get that data," Zydlewski said. "When we did [and learned fish hadn't moved upstream to spawn] it was a bit of a disappointment."

The discovery of sturgeon in the fish lift at Milford "changes the complexion a little bit," she added.

Zydlewski said that based on the researchers' understanding of the optimal water temperature and time of year during the spawning season on other rivers, it

didn't appear the sturgeon that made it to Milford were intent on spawning. Instead, they might have been exploring.

"Based on what they see on the Kennebec [River], based on when these fish went into the fish lift, the conditions don't seem to be appropriate for spawning," Zydlewski said. "However, we don't know how long they were up there before they went into the lift."

Only future study will help determine that.

And while Johnston will be moving on, she's confident a lucky graduate student eventually will get to pop the cork on a champagne bottle bought several years ago, scheduled to be opened only when evidence of spawning activity is discovered.

"Someone, someday," Johnston said. "But it was worth celebrating [the two fish that made it to Milford, too]."



Bangor Dental ASSOCIATES FAMILY DENTISTRY

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Bangor Dental Associates is excited to announce that Dr. Susan Dellaripa, DMD will be joining our practice this summer on August 1, 2016! Dr. Dellaripa practiced as a General Dentist with the United States Air Force for four years. She recently completed a year-long General Practice Residency in Lewiston. Dr. Dellaripa is looking forward to relocating to Bangor and working alongside Dr. Speckhardt and the rest of our team to provide dental care for you and your family.

Bangor Dental Associates would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. Rachel Lukas, DMD who will be leaving the practice to return home to Massachusetts at the end of July. Joining our practice in 2014, Dr. Lukas played an integral part in growing Bangor Dental Associates and caring for our patients at its new location at 62 Corporate Drive. We thank Dr. Lukas and wish her the very best in her future endeavors.



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