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Western Regional News

The neglected fifth “season”: it is not just about when birds do “it”

What are the seasons? As we think of banding as a monitoring tool in WBBA-land of North America, we think of the four seasons: spring and fall migration (about a month each, the core of most ‘migration monitoring’ stations), our traditional three months of summer (think of the Institute of Bird Populations [IBP]), and then winter. I would offer the case for the fifth season of late July and August. Some American Indian tribes divided the year into five seasons: blossoming, ripening, late summer, harvest, and winter. So should we. Let us look at these seasons.

When it comes to trends from censuses, I opine that most agencies and organizations suffer a severe case of breeding season (blossoming and ripening) myopia. Not that it is not unimportant, for certain! This is when all of the sex takes place and the inevitable young are produced, with their unformed plumages, habits, and skulls. Results from IBP and their myriad of partners have continued to amaze us with fantastic insights from constant-effort netting in this season. However, it is also when food usually is super abundant and readily obtained. In many ways, “living is easy.”

As you receive this issue, many of us will be gearing up for fall migration monitoring. The harvest season presents us a great summary of what happened during the ripening season up north. This annual migration festival has its roots in the peerless Chan Robbins’ “Operation Recovery” in the 1950s, the first network of banding stations in the world. It is carried on with today’s networks, such as the epic, continent-spanning Canadian Migration Monitoring Network.

Then comes winter when things settle down for a five-month long period of stability, with our migrants working out relationships with their Neotropical residents down south, and the more northern species coping with limited food and harsh cold winters. This is also when we should be doing “constant effort trapping,” but more on that at another time.

What about that time of year when many interesting things are happening in the ‘fifth season’ of late summer? You know that season. That is when much of the juvenal mortality takes place, when the young birds imprint on the place where they are going to breed next year, many adults head south while teenagers drift around in their directionless (or perhaps directional . . . facts we do not know for most species) wanderings, and when we absent ourselves from our mist nets by taking vacations or attending the WBBA meetings in Utah!

In your plans for your banding station, consider including the fifth season. It is when all bets are off. Until then, most species have similar life histories, in lock step with almost carbon copies of breeding activities (courtship, nest building, eggs, and feeding young). But now, as July heats up in the West, each species pursues a different strategy of its own particular “adaptive syndrome,” honed over thousands of generations, one that works for each. The habitats they use in WBBA territory during this hot, drying period (when, at least, food is becoming scarce or localized) are likely critical to the species. We need your time and energy so that we can begin to paint the complete picture of when and where the action is. Good banding is good science!

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