



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

October 7, 2022



Western Tanager

The Fall Migration and What You Can Do to Help

Join us while we Sing for Songbirds throughout the month of October!

October is an interesting time of year here at CWC. It is when we start to see an influx of adult songbirds who are injured or become sick during their southwardly winter migration. Some of these unique birds include Western Wood Pewees, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Western Tanagers, Cedar Waxwings, and White-crowned Sparrows. Thousands of species of birds make a long and treacherous journey twice a year as they fly from their northern summer breeding grounds to their southern winter habitats in the fall, and back again in the spring.



Cedar Waxwing

What causes these birds to make such a dangerous and exhausting trek? The exact process is not fully understood, but changes in weather, length of day, and food supplies are believed to play an important role. New studies have suggested that hormones are also a factor for migratory birds. Caged migratory individuals have shown periods of restlessness in the spring and fall, despite being supplied ample food and provided appropriate habitats.

How birds migrate is still not fully known. Many young individuals will successfully make their first long journey alone to winter habitats, and travel back north in the spring to where they were born. It is believed that birds use a combination of techniques to find their way, including sensing the earth's magnetic field, following geographical cues such as coastlines and mountains, observing the position of the sun and stars, and learning routes from older members of the flock.

The majority of migratory species travel at night, when temperatures are more stable and wind currents are smoother. These calm conditions are critical for small birds, like warblers, who could easily use up energy reserves trying to stay on course during rougher weather. The lower temperatures at night also reduce the potential for individuals to overheat and flying under the cover of darkness can ensure safe passage for birds who would potentially be eaten by daytime predators like hawks.

It is common for birds to take the same migratory path each year, with very few changes. Along the west coast over a billion individuals use a route called the Pacific Flyway. This migratory path is over 4,000 miles long and stretches from the Arctic down past the west coast of Mexico. Most species do not travel the entire length of the flyway, but instead use a portion of the route to bring them to their winter habitats.



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These long migration journeys are fraught with danger, and human impact is making them even more deadly. Nutrient rich habitats that have been used for thousands of years to refuel birds along their way are being destroyed by sprawling land developments, making it harder for exhausted birds to rest. A major cause of injury that we see here at CWC are songbirds colliding with windows and buildings while flying over cities. Since these birds fly mostly at night, the bright artificial lights can disorient animals causing them to crash. Individuals also waste a significant amount of energy while they are disoriented, causing exhaustion and depleting fat stores.

Luckily there are some simple things everyone can do to help migratory birds.

- Turn off all unnecessary outdoor lights during the months migratory birds are flying by
- Using blackout curtains can also reduce the amount of indoor light that shines through windows
- Direct all possible outdoor lighting downward to keep the night skies at dark as possible
- Installing automatic motion sensor lights will reduce the amount of time light bulbs are turned on

If you do find an injured bird this fall, place them in a box with air holes in a warm, quiet, dark location and contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center for help. Depending on the injury and the time of year, it is possible that a migratory bird would need to be cared for at a rehabilitation center until the species once again migrates through the area, returning to their summer breeding grounds.