

More Signs of Spring: Both Good and Bad



Spring always seems to arrive in stages of abrupt change, announcing its presence with cues that even we vacuous humans have to sit up and take notice of! Taken together, they all mean that nature is on the upswing.

Like the arrival this past week of the first pair of Brown-headed Cowbirds, *Molothrus ater*. You should be able to hear birders grumbling, “*#\$% cowbirds,” from wherever you are right now. Even dedicated birders detest cowbirds, as they’re the ultimate in “child predators.”

Cowbirds are brood parasites, which is just a fancy term for the fact that they don’t build their own nests but instead lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, often smaller birds like warblers, vireos or sparrows. When the egg hatches, the “adoptive” parents feed it as one of their own but the young

cowbird chick responds by pushing the other eggs/chicks out of the nest until it’s the only one left. Not nice!

The arrival of cowbirds is my cue to stop filling the feeding stations for a month or two. I always hope that this policy, which really doesn’t hurt the native species since there are ever-increasing numbers of insects and other food sources at this time of year, will make the cowbirds continue on their way rather than parasitize the local birds, especially my favorite Pine Warblers. It’s probably a vain hope, but it also serves notice to the Chipping Sparrows that “it’s time to go!”

A far more appealing abrupt change brought on by spring is the sudden appearance of flowers on the bare branches of winter. The Redbuds, Buckeyes and Plums, especially, have all burst into bloom this past week. Even our Pear tree,



A Mexican Plum, Prunus mexicana, in full flower attracts a wide variety of pollinating insects, including this Gray Hairstreak, Strymon melinus.

which is infamous for attracting early spring migrating Monarchs, has sprung into spring a bit early—the Monarchs generally arrive around the Spring Equinox and the pear tree usually waits for them.

The appeal of these early blooming fruit trees, for me, is their attractiveness to early pollinators, especially (as you have no doubt guessed by now) butterflies. Last Wednesday, our Mexican Plum had four different hairstreaks (Gray,

Olive (or Juniper), Dusky Blue and Great Purple, for anyone who cares) all visiting simultaneously.

On Friday I stopped at a patch of Sandhill, or Chickasaw, Plum and found a few of the hairstreaks joined by two swallowtails, an American Lady and both Juvenal’s and Wild Indigo Duskywings. Oh Joy! Excuse me, I’m going to go back out and look for the nearest Redbud...