



Brunswick Wildlife Christopher Columbus, Birder

I celebrated the Columbus anniversary weekend by birding beaches from Carolina Beach to the southern tip of Oak Island. The fall migration of birds and butterflies did not disappoint. They were even better than the weather!

Forget the Monday holiday...the real Columbus Day is October 12, the anniversary of his landfall after a thirty-three-day crossing from the Canary Islands to the Bahamas. The weekend was also the anniversary of my sister's birth and Hurricane Hazel's demolition of the Lower Cape Fear coast. Mind you, I am not comparing the impact of these three events on the new world.

Columbus and other ancient mariners knew the value of bird sightings. Certain species were the harbinger of land soon to appear on the horizon. At this point, I am resisting my computer's urge to embellish the ancient mariner pun...sometimes this machine is like an albatross around my neck. Suffice it to say, that in ancient times, most islands were found because of the presence of birds.

I am extremely happy to see fall migrants but for Columbus they may have been a life saver! As the voyage took its toll on the crews and captains of the three small ships, Columbus held fast to his westward route in the face of threatened mutiny.

By October 6, many large flocks of birds were flying over...species not known to Columbus...but recognized as land birds. It was his first experience with the new world's fall migration. Morale was greatly improved if only temporarily.

On October 10, they reached an agreement that, if land was not found by October 13, they would turn back. On October 11, flocks of seabirds passed overhead, a cause for renewed optimism. By 2 AM the next morning landfall was confirmed!

Today we understand what happened. We know great numbers of migrant songbirds stage in the northeast and then fly south over the ocean assisted by winds ranging from north to west that follow a cold front. They count on easterly trade winds to eventually push them toward their destinations in the West Indies or South America, just as the trade winds did for Columbus' ships.

We also know that encountering concentrations of pelagic birds such as shearwaters and petrels signals closeness to a continental shelf where upwelling water rich with prey attracts these seabirds. Finally, sightings of terns and other coastal waterbirds indicate land is not far away.

Sailors today are met with similar movements of birds over the open ocean. It is common for tired birds to land on sailboats, cruise ships, and other oceangoing vessels for a brief rest.

Land birders wait as cold fronts pass and the wind backs around the compass rose in a counterclockwise direction, changing from southwest to north to northwest bringing very welcomed cool air and birds. Us birders use our knowledge of the weather's impact on birds and flock to the coast to chase the best and most that fall migration has to offer.

During my four-day "Columbus Anniversary Bird-a-thon", I located twelve species of warblers including prizes such as Cape May, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, and Black-throated Green warblers. These species breed along the mountain ridges of North Carolina north to the boreal forest of the northern United States and southern Canada. We get to share them for fleeting moments as they pass through.

My other migrating songbirds included Scarlet Tanager, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and Eastern Wood-Pewee. Also, I found several species that had returned to spend the winter with us such as American Black Duck, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, House Wren, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

The waterbirds at the southern tip of Oak Island, in large mixed flocks, were numerous. The flock that posed for me included at least five tern species, most outbound such as the Sandwich Terns but also Caspian Terns, returning winter residents.

There were dozens of Black Skimmers plus a small flock of migrating dowitchers within the large flock. I finally got my photograph of skimmers resting chin down in the sand...a sight one has to see to believe.

For now some components of this fall's migration seem light. The raptor migration yielded only three Peregrine Falcons, one Merlin, and a Northern Harrier. Also, the heavy movement of migrating and overwintering sparrows has not arrived. They may be behind the next cold front!

The butterflies? Common Buckeyes, Long-tailed Skippers, Gulf Fritillaries, and Cloudless Sulphurs were abundant. On Friday, I found a prized Painted Lady near the aquarium. On Sunday, hundreds of migrating Monarchs were streaming down Oak Island, so many that I drove fifteen miles under the speed limit to ensure I did not hit one.

Columbus' birding career? We can infer it was successful based on log entries like the one describing large flocks of parrots in the Bahamas. This rest is history.

The more I learn about nature, weather, and celestial navigation the more I marvel at how much was known in Columbus' day. Their knowledge was based on being constantly in touch with the natural world. If given the choice of listening for migrants overhead and watching flocks cloud the Milky Way or watching Doppler radar, you know which one I'd take.

John Ennis

The impact of weather on bird migrations and the timing and flow of birds during the fall as described above are generalizations. With our little avian friends, there are always many exceptions.

