



An out-of-place ruby feather shows how the angle of sunlight interacts with internal feather structure to produce shifting gorget colors



Other cavity-nesting birds such as this Tufted Titmouse are nesting nearby and cleaning up my remaining supplies of winter bird food

Brunswick Wildlife Spring Lands in the Backyard

Over the past week or so I have driven the dirt roads of central Brunswick County looking for signs that spring is replacing the irritating winter we've just survived. I searched for birds returning from migration, snakes, wildflowers, mammals, butterflies, and any other wildlife that flies, runs, crawls, or slithers.

Last Friday morning, I was hoping instead for a rainy day; a good day to catch-up on editing images, perform a little spring cleaning inside, and cleaning out and organizing the garage. The rain stopped early. I went out through the garage to get the newspaper and stepped into a loud dawn chorus of birdsong. The heavy clouds raced away as the cold front passed and the birds heralded a beautiful day.

Within the hour the garage was in my rearview mirror and I was looking forward to another great day of wildlife watching and photography in the ditches.

Returning home mid-afternoon, I decided to rest before tackling the garage. After two hours of "power napping", I looked out back and saw a bluebird on my newly installed bluebird box.

The cleaning would wait. After all I had already made significant progress the day before by putting out my wind chimes and a hummingbird feeder in addition to installing the bluebird box earlier in the week.

Folks, if you do not already know, retirement is a perpetual snow day...you are free to schedule early morning field trips, the late night pounding on the computer, and power napping in between.

My sister gave me a deluxe bluebird box for Christmas. I would not have bought it myself; however, I would have had asked about “rent-to-own” options. It is a dang penthouse instead of a birdhouse! It even has side entrances for the cleaning staff (me) and one for viewing and photo ops.

I grabbed a chair from the patio and placed it on the grass in the shade. Suddenly I had a first-of-the-season hummer in my face...a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Apparently my chair was a little too close to the feeder.

Chances are good that the hummer spent last summer locally and had arrived earlier to claim his territory for breeding. He was just waiting, visiting other neighborhood feeders, for me to get out of the ditches and get my backyard act together.

A hummingbird’s iridescent colors, mating behavior, and territorial defense make them fascinating to watch. If you have feeders, no doubt they are the jewels of your yard.

Hummingbird feathers shift iridescent color brightness depending on the angle of incidence of sunlight with respect to the viewer’s eye. This is due to the internal structure of their feathers.

The gorget, the feathered throat area, of adult males gives many hummingbird species their name. The male Ruby-throated’s gorget is iridescent ruby while females and young have white gorgets. In young males the white gorget will eventually become streaked with color as it matures into adult plumage.

Folks that feed hummingbirds will notice how the Ruby-throated’s gorget seems to change from red to almost black and back to red again as it moves its head from side to side. Different levels of brightness in between cause the shimmering effect of iridescence. The light falling on the out-of-place ruby feather in the photo is at a different angle than the remaining gorget feathers that appear black.

I fetched the camera and moved my chair over a little...and welcomed spring to my backyard!

Birds were everywhere and most were singing including a White-throated Sparrow that is a winter holdover. He will disappear, however, in a couple of weeks as he leaves to claim his territory far to our north. He’s just practicing singing for now.

That is one sweet song. He began singing a few weeks ago...a somewhat weak and incomplete song. Now his hormone levels are higher and the song is complete and getting stronger.

Different species of birds came to different types of feeders. House Finches were the first species I heard singing on territory several weeks ago. This day they were the first feeding their begging young at the feeders.

Other feeding birds included Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, and Brown-headed Nuthatches. All are cavity nesters who, like the bluebirds, are hurting for dead trees with suitable cavities.

Fortunately, all seem to be nesting nearby. The bluebird is the only one who received help from me; however, I would have been just as happy if the chickadees had claimed the new penthouse first.

The Brown-headed Nuthatches are nesting at the top of a snag in my neighbor's backyard. The snag is in line with my feeders and my chair so I can watch the nuthatch dive off and fly directly at me before it pulls up for a landing on the feeder. Cool!

During the weekend, I completed my spring cleaning of feeders and rearranged my feeder configuration. I tossed my remaining winter seed mix and replaced it with fresh black sunflower seed.

In parting, I'll offer a tip for feeding hummers. Last year I found great (and cheap) hummingbird feeders at a local "big box" store. I bought several so I always have a clean one on deck. They are readily cleaned in the upper basket of a dishwasher.

Time to go to the ditches! The garage? LOL!!!

John Ennis



My male bluebird stands guard as his mate places nesting material into their new nest box. Think she knows feng shui?



A Carolina Chickadee helps finish up the winter food supply



Brown-headed Nuthatch waits its turn at the trough



Feeder attack!