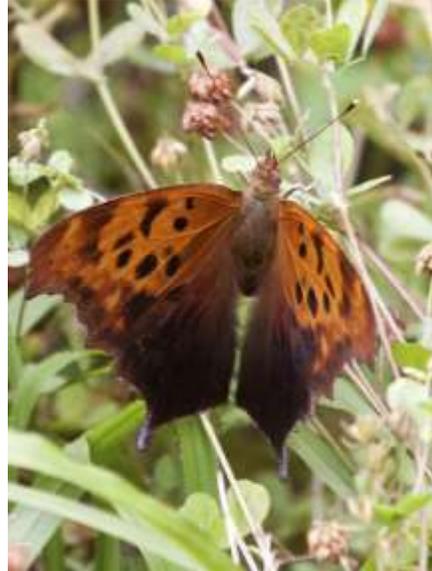




A male Bobolink, taking a migration break, rests at Funston farms



This Question Mark butterfly is “fresh”, having metamorphosed this spring. It represents the summer form of this species.

Brunswick Wildlife Spring Migration 2012

Sorry, I cannot give you the dates for meteorological spring 2012. Meteorologists will eventually be able to wrap their arms around the data and define it. For now, I have only heard that March 2012 was the warmest March in recorded history. And how! Mind you, I am not complaining about the run of awesomely beautiful days!

My favorite Lower Cape Fear bird seasons are fall and winter because we have great birds and mostly decent conditions. During spring and summer, I enjoy tracking and photographing a few species of breeding birds as documented in last summer’s story about beach nesting birds.

Photographing butterflies and other insects is a great way to suffer through summer until the fall bird migration starts.

A wide variety of migration strategies have evolved by different bird species over thousands of years. Birds start migration based on the photoperiod (the length of daylight) because migration is driven by food supply and only indirectly by temperature and weather conditions.

Those species that overwinter in South and Central America and the Caribbean probably started their return trip this spring as normal. Our breeding birds seem to be returning approximately the same date as in past years. For example, Prothonotary Warblers showed up on Governors Road on their expected return date of April 7.

This spring there seems to be two noticeable differences from previous years: caterpillars and butterflies seem to be a couple of weeks ahead in their life cycle and trees leafed out early. Both of these differences have caused me to shift to more insect photography weeks earlier than expected. You can hear the little avian dudes but many are singing from behind leaves thus creating frustrating photo ops.

Birds often stop at sites along their path to refuel and rest before continuing their journey. Many tend to use the same or close to the same breeding, stopover, and overwintering sites that have proven successful in the past unless bad weather or other events intervene. This tendency is called site fidelity and it gives us a basis on where to find birds from year to year.

Small flocks of Bobolinks stopover locally during fall migration and even smaller numbers stop in spring. Nothing like the numbers from long ago when Brunswick County was part of the “Rice Belt” and before Bobolinks suffered large population declines. Deservedly, they were called “Ricebirds” on area rice plantations.

Bobolinks are a grasslands species that breeds in meadows and pastures in the East. Male Bobolinks return to their breeding grounds a week or so earlier than females. This guy has almost finished molting (his pre-alternate molt) into his breeding (alternate) plumage.

Another rite of spring for bluebird box owners is the cleaning of boxes for each season’s first bluebird brood. My son-in-law was surprised to find a Southern Flying Squirrel when he started cleaning out his bluebird box. They are nocturnal and their eyes are very large...so large that if you look closely you can see the reflection of the sky and background in my image.

Flying Squirrels do not have the ability for powered flight like birds and bats. They have a furry membrane between each wrist and ankle that allows them to glide between trees, with a maximum glide of approximately 100 yards. Cool fact: when they land they scramble around to other side of the tree, a defensive maneuver that protects them in case they were spotted gliding by an owl.

The Question Mark butterfly above metamorphosed this spring as a member of the first brood of 2012. This species has two broods annually; the second overwinters as flying adults by hiding in cracks and crevices to protect against cold and foul weather. They emerge in spring to oviposit eggs for the new year’s first brood.

Though it is not shown in this image, there is a silver mark on the underside of each wing that resembles a question mark. Actually it’s more like a comma with a dot at one end. Care must be taken to distinguish this species from its close relative the Eastern Comma (no kidding). One distinguishing mark is that the dot is missing on the Comma’s wings.

Normally Question Marks do not nectar on flowers. Instead adults feed on carrion, sap, rotten fruit, and damp dirt or sand. Well camouflaged to look like fallen leaves, Question Marks are fairly easily found perched on dirt roads which pass through wet forests such as Lee Buck Road where this photograph was taken. They may be seen sucking up moisture and nutrients from the mud.

To see more of my spring album, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/JESpring2012>. So far 2012 has been good to me and fall migration is already featured in my daydreams. Did I mention that fall migration starts around mid-July?

John Ennis



Falcate Orangetip



My son-in-law was surprised to find a Southern Flying Squirrel when he began cleaning out his bluebird box for spring.