

The Colors of Fall Migration

by [Stephen Shunk](#) of [Paradise Birding](#)

The morning unfolded in a thick misty fog. From the bluffs at the island's edge, we could barely see the rocky shoreline below. The lack of visibility drove us back to the heart of the island, into the Enchanted Forest, so named for the dozens of miniature "fairy homes" built of sticks and detritus by the more whimsical residents and visitors to these woods. Once in the trees, our visibility improved, and songbirds began to appear.

An Ovenbird scratched in the leaf litter near the Ice House Pond. A female Blue-winged Warbler popped around the alders, plucking worms from the leaves and branches like she had discovered the last shrub on Earth. Closer to the village, the trees and hedgerows dripped with warblers and vireos. Fortuitously, we had hit the peak of fall migration on Monhegan Island, a small and isolated "migrant trap" off Maine's central coast.



This juvenile male Wilson's Warbler, photographed in fall migration, is just starting to get his black cap.

Many birders see fall migration as a challenging, or even difficult, time to watch songbirds. Many species lose their "breeding plumage" through the summer and don duller fall colors with more subtle field marks (eye rings, wing bars, and others). The aptly named "confusing fall warblers" even earn special workshops led by the continent's leading naturalists. In the western states, where birders contend with a mere dozen regular warbler species and only two or three regular vireos, fall plumages present a manageable challenge. In contrast, a visit to the East Coast brings the potential warbler tally to thirty, with more than a half-dozen vireos thrown in for spice.

Soon after arriving on Monhegan, we ran into a group of birders from the Maine Audubon Society. True to form for the birder clan, these folks were friendly and welcoming, and they invited us to join their rounds on the island. With their local expertise and many extra eyes, we missed very few birds. If it weren't for their assistance, we westerners would have drowned in confusing fall warblers. Instead, we identified 17 different warbler species, many of

which we enjoy each summer in the northern boreal forest, albeit in full breeding plumage. Their fall colors, though subtle and humbling to the birder, glowed brightly with the hues of the season, allowing them to blend perfectly with the island's fading deciduous flora.



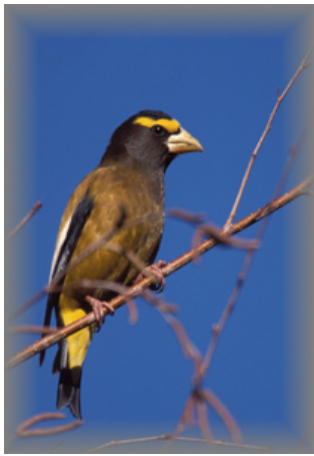
The Harris's Sparrow, a rare winter visitor to Oregon, loses most of its black hood in winter and its face changes from gray to brown.

More of Monhegan's fall songbirds posed their respective challenges. Baltimore Oriole and Scarlet Tanager had shed their striking orange and red breeding colors. The Swamp Sparrow's rusty crown had faded and the male Bobolink's elegant "tuxedo" had molted into a creamy yellowish sheen. But not all the birds we enjoyed bore cryptic seasonal plumages. The Gray Catbird, White-crowned

Sparrow, and Northern Mockingbird displayed their year-round colors, and the Rusty Blackbird exhibited the tawny fall plumage for which it is named, in contrast to its plain black breeding plumage.

Not all the colors of fall migration make birding more difficult. Like the Rusty Blackbird, a number of other birds may be easier to identify in fall than in spring or summer, displaying brighter colors with the onset of autumn. The Warbling Vireo and a number of normally drab-colored flycatchers pick up a beautiful yellowish tone in the fall. Young birds of the season of many species molt their juvenile plumage and wear sharp new colors. The woodpeckers, and the sapsuckers in particular, look striking in their fresh fall feathers. The juvenile Northern Harrier shows a bright cinnamon belly, and a young Golden Eagle soaring overhead is unmistakable with its bold white "wrist" patches and tail band.

The Monhegan Island encounter presented an excellent introduction to the challenges of fall songbird identification. Back home in Oregon, the first Swamp Sparrow of the season (a rare bird in the West) was easier to label having seen one a few weeks earlier "down east." The sharply defined broken eye ring and greenish tint of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet were just as striking in the local woods as in coastal Maine. And the return of the fall thrushes – American Robin, Townsend's Solitaire, Hermit and Varied Thrushes – signaled a welcome return to the mountains, a landform missing from the Maine experience.



As the first snow falls here in Sisters, many fall migrants continue their southward journey. Fall migration is far from over, however. The transition into winter will see increasing numbers of colorful “winter” finches, such as **Evening Grosbeak**, Cassin’s Finch, and Red Crossbill, with hopes for a winter with Common Redpolls at the feeders. The striking and statuesque Rough-legged Hawks will soon move into the area, and elegant white Tundra Swans will occupy unfrozen waters of the region. The electric azure of the Mountain Bluebirds will dot desert fencerows and juniper trees like holiday ornaments. The aspen and mountain ash hold onto their last bit of fall color and the correlated colors of fall migration usher in the new season.

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