



# Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon  
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## For Immediate Release

### AND THEY'RE OFF.....!

The oldest thoroughbred stakes race in the country may be the Travers at the Saratoga racetrack this month, but our migratory birds are beginning the most ancient race to the "finish line" at their wintering grounds. A recent bird report on August 22 described "at least 12 great blue herons, an equal number of black-crowned night herons, mostly juveniles, 3 great egrets, as well as 2 green herons all within the field of view of the binoculars". Similar spectacular views are waiting for us everyday. Groups of adults and juveniles are gathering in the grasses, shrubs and garden near my house as I write, demonstrating their "zugenruhe", the German word for migratory restlessness, or as Tom Rush would say, "The Urge For Going". To put on fat, they are frantically eating anything they can find as they prepare for the "race to the finish line" in Central America (Bobolink), the Caribbean (Cattle Egret), the Andes Mountains (Blackpoll warbler), or as far south as the tip of South America (Arctic Tern). Like the magnificent thoroughbreds, these birds are definitely "on edge" as they enter their "starting gate".

Earlier this month, tree swallows by the thousands roosted in trees in wetlands or by water, flying around to feed on anything that hatches or flies by. Look for common nighthawks "sailing" over buildings in town. When you can see them pass in front of a full moon, you have had a marvelous moment. One night I heard a loon calling above the house. As the month progresses, the busy, moving groups of birds become more obvious, especially overhead. Kettles of turkey vultures are appearing over the ridges and valleys as they try to catch the thermals. Soon the hawks will follow, mostly over land, but the peregrine falcon has been known to hitch a ride on the ships at sea along its coastal route from northern Greenland through Brazil, "sweeping to the finish line" in Argentina.

Next month we say goodbye to the hummers, who have been quite "edgy" at feeders lately. These little hustlers will be "out in front" over the Gulf of Mexico at twenty miles an hour en route to Central America. Those studying flight speed using Doppler radar equipment have "clocked" the Spotted Sandpiper's ground speeds at 25 mph, Cedar Waxwings at 21-29 mph, and Red-winged Blackbirds at 17-23 mph. Depending on wind direction and altitude, speeds can reach 49 mph, faster than horses "cruising along" at the track (around 40 mph). Where 1,100 pound thoroughbreds hit the finish line after a mile and a quarter race in 2 minutes or so, some 3-4 ounce birds "breeze" aloft for days without stopping!

Within the next couple of months when you notice birds "bunching up" as they fly, remember that this group behavior is advantageous to the birds. By conserving their energy, providing protection from predators, and guiding the immatures, flocks of birds will "drive to the finish line" with greater accuracy. Like the loon I heard, birds will give call notes to locate and direct the flock especially at night. As the moonlight increases after Labor Day, try sitting outside on a still evening and see what you can hear or see flying across the moon. And just think, they know where they are and where they are going! To learn more about this great mystery, go to <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/migration>.

Whether you are at the races or just birding this August, good luck!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non-profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit [www.nekaudubon.org](http://www.nekaudubon.org). Art work by Robin Rothman.