

BOREAL BITS

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THE AMERICAN ROBIN

'There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.' Robert Lynd

It goes by the scientific name of *Turdus migratorius* but we know it as one of the first birds that we, as children, learn to name. It is one of the first migrators to arrive in the spring and among the last to leave in the fall. It is so much an icon of spring that a few people actually chose the American robin as the bird that best represents Northwestern Ontario. Although it is not the provincial bird of any Canadian province it serves as the official bird of three states: Michigan, Wisconsin and Connecticut.

Glen and Sally Hall reported robin hatchlings during the first week in August in a nest built in a hanging flower basket. Sally had found the nest almost two weeks before and at that time there were eggs in it. She had reached up into the basket to feel if the soil was dry enough to require water and was surprised to feel feather. Being naturalists, she and her husband followed the development of the robin family and saw two chicks fledge from the nest.

Another couple found a robin beneath their deck sitting on eggs on August 22 when most of us were sure the birds had completed their biological imperative and were enjoying some relaxing weeks before thoughts turned to destinations south. What were the adult

robins doing by raising a family in mid-to-late August? A quick perusal of the reference books provided a possible answer; our robins normally raise two to three clutches of chicks each season. With an incubation time of approximately two weeks and a nestling stage of two weeks, that means that mom robin is ready to begin a family every four weeks. While she is incubating a new clutch of eggs, Mr. Robin is feeding the newly



fledged chicks and teaching them the ways of the robin world. Because each clutch consists of approximately four chicks the world would be a mass of robins if nature's forces didn't 'cull the herd'. Any child of the wild that survives its first year has a good chance of surviving another year. It is estimated that only one of four robin chicks survives the summer in which it was born, while fall and winter hold greater dangers. As it is with young of any species in the wild, it's the first year that represents the biggest hurdle. As it is, according to information available through the University of Michigan, survival in the wild averages out to about two years but this figures includes the horrendous die-off during the first year. The oldest recorded robin in the wild lived to the ripe old age of fourteen years, a statistic that was obviously gathered through bird banding data.

During early spring and late fall, robins flock in great numbers. Our back yard was the staging site of approximately one hundred robins during a late October weekend. Here the birds were gathering to top-up their energy reserves before heading out on that most



perilous behaviour, migration. Many songbirds migrate within the protection of a flock. It certainly has its advantages: there are extra eyes to watch for ever-present predators and the chances of a particular bird being taken by a predator are lessened greatly. There have been a number of reports of robins wintering in this area although it is unusual. Due to their varied eating patterns—in summer it is 40% insects and 60% fruit—they can survive the winter on the withered, frozen fruits and berries of crabapples, Saskatoons and the like. A local resident fed a robin blueberries from his freezer for almost three full winter months.

But robins are a spring bird and it is for this that they will be forever appreciated. Their cheery song that wakes us in the morning and sings the day to sleep in the evening is all too short.

(Photos – Wm Burke)