

Checking in with the Snowbirds
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Last week, while my partner Cody and I were out birding, we caught sight of a promising flash of gold in the branches above. Excited exploration around the tree – at first glancing only a flickering tail feather, the flash of a small black eye, a streak of russet along its flank – eventually culminated in a vaguely disappointed sigh.

“Just another Chestnut-Sided Warbler...”



Chestnut-sided Warbler

A sentence I never thought I would say! Chestnut-Sided Warblers are among my favorite songbirds. If you're unfamiliar, they have a cute golden cap, striking chestnut streaks along their sides – they're well named – and an incredibly curious disposition. They migrate through Connecticut with many other warblers in the spring, and some, including a breeding pair in my parent's yard, routinely set up shop in Kent for the summer: building nests, hunting insects, and rearing young. I love spotting them bobbing their heads at me from the branches above, darting haphazardly after beetles and worms, or trilling their sweet song throughout the warmer months.



Resplendent Quetzal

So why the disappointment at spotting one during January, of all months? I should have been delighted – before that week, I hadn't seen one since September! But, as it turns out, during that particular week, I saw over 30. Even with the overabundance, the charm hadn't quite worn off – they are still pretty darn cute – but given the location, the sheer number of Chestnut-Sided Warblers had become a bit of a joke. We were, after all, on a birding trip to Costa Rica; I was not expecting to see quite so many of my backyard neighbors!

The Chestnut-Sided Warblers weren't the only familiar faces to greet us in Central America. Over the course of our trip, I saw a staggering 301 species of birds that I had never laid eyes on before, from the astonishing turquoise-and-red Resplendent Quetzal to the surprisingly American Robin-like national bird of the country, the Clay-Colored Thrush. But I also saw another 60 species that were quite familiar to me: the 'snowbirds,' as we call anyone who spends the summer months in the North and the winter ones in the warmth of the South.



Violet Sabrewing

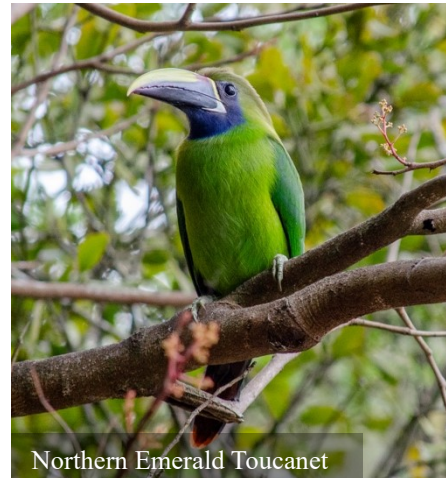


Spotted Sandpiper in front of a Fasciated Tiger-Heron

A lone Ruby-Throated Hummingbird lurked among the Violet Sabrewings and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds on the feeders. A Spotted Sandpiper – common resident on the shores of the Housatonic – foraged beside the imposing Fasciated Tiger Heron. Each new raptor we spotted was more likely to be a Connecticut-frequenting Turkey Vulture, Osprey, or Broad-winged Hawk than it was to be one of the Costa Rica-resident Hawk-Eagles. And few bird calls were as difficult to identify as the familiar chirps of Wood Thrushes and songs of House Wrens, simply because we were not expecting to hear them there.

As much as it was occasionally disappointing to chase down a bird, hoping for a brand-new species, and instead find one I'm guaranteed to see in my yard in a few short months, I was rather cheered by the familiar faces (feathers?). It was a small relief to not have to struggle to remember which of the 600-odd possible new bird species they might be, but, more importantly, it felt a bit like running into an old friend that you hadn't expected to see again for a long while.

With the cold and the snow and the early evenings of mid-winter, I miss our spring birds. The Northern Cardinals and Black-Capped Chickadees that stick around on our birdfeeders are lovely and comforting, but they're not quite the same as the flocks of migrants surging back into our trees with the warming spring winds, chasing each other around the budding flowers and hopping after the newly emerging insects.



Northern Emerald Toucanet



Black Hawk-Eagle

So I was happy to get a chance to visit with some of those missing birds. It was also a very keen reminder of how amazing those tiny creatures actually are. A Chestnut-Sided Warbler weighs 0.4-0.5 ounces and has a wingspan of 19-21 centimeters – only about half the weight and twice the length of a piece of sandwich bread.

Connecticut (or JFK, in my case) is about 2,200 miles from Costa Rica as the crow (or warbler) flies. Getting there took me a car and a plane, a few months of planning, and enough hours of travel to leave me stiff, grumpy, and starving. I don't know how fast Chestnut-Sided Warblers (*Setophaga pensylvanica*) can go, but I do know that they start leaving our shores in September and have reached their peak

densities in Costa Rica by October.¹ I also know that a 2015 study tracking their close relatives, the Blackpoll Warbler (*Setophaga striata*), found that their autumn commute over the Atlantic includes a 3-day, non-stop flight of between 1,400 and 1,700 miles.² I know that getting to Costa Rica probably takes them just days to weeks, with only the power of those tiny wings and any bugs they've got time to scavenge up along the way.

I know that this feat makes our little birds pretty amazing, and all the more amazing for the fact that they are important to more ecosystems than I'd ever seen before. Protecting our birds and our migrant species whenever we have the good fortune of being near them felt pretty important just then, as I watched a Chestnut-Sided Warbler that could well be the exact same one I had watched from my deck that past summer, hopping happily through the trees alongside Red-legged Honeycreepers and Northern Emerald-Toucanets thousands of miles from home. Our little birds are quite something; keeping their summer homes safe, by protecting their forests or letting their insects thrive or making our windows less of a threat, started to feel like a pretty good New Year's Resolution just then.



Red-legged Honeycreeper



Lesson's Motmot

That trip down south was a great way to kick off 2024. I hope you all have had a good start to the year as well – and that you'll forgive me for using the year's first newsletter as an excuse to show off some of my favorite Costa Rica bird photos! The remainder of the year's newsletters are going to talk a lot about the ways we, as individuals and a community, have some power to protect and shape the ecosystems we're a part of, from the smallest warblers to the planet at large. I hope you'll tune in!



Northern Jacana



Chestnut-headed Oropendola