



March 14, 2018

That brilliant blue sky, flowers bursting on the branches and winding through the tree lines. It looks an awful lot like spring out there. But something's missing. Something you won't put your finger on until they all come crashing in weeks from now.

The songbirds are on their way.

Millions of them, flying in riotous waves. As they come filtering through in April, that thin, empty background sound we now hear — mostly just the March wind — will fill with tweets and

thwerps and the euphoria of being alive in springtime will finally sink in.

If you've spent the last few months shaking ice pellets off your face, buffeted by winter winds while lurching behind your dog on your daily walk, this is good news indeed. Those warbles and peeps are background music puts a little more pep in everyone's step. I know my wolfhounds Oona and Oisin bounce and strut when the songbirds come bustling in.

But Sully, our mixed breed rescue, is the only one who *watches* them. Of our four dogs, Sully's not the one we'll have retake his ACT's hoping for a higher score. The little guy does his best. In the Three Stooges, he'd be the Curly of the bunch. But he's the only one who pays much attention to what's in the air and the treetops.

He's part Tennessee Treeing Walker Coonhound. He stands in the yard looking straight up, rapt. Mostly, he's scanning for raccoons and possums, but he sure keeps his eye on that Red-tailed Hawk that's been buzzing the yard all winter long. It's shopping for little animals for lunch. Sully's taking himself off the menu.

When the tiny, bright birds come shooting through the trees in springtime, Sully does a little excited dance, as if he's warning them, "Look up! Watch the sky!" But they let the crows mob and harrow the hawks. The songbirds have places to be.

In Tennessee there's one day the bird watchers wait for, a day between mid-April and mid-May — no one knows when exactly. It's called "the Big Day," the peak day in Tennessee for bands of birds migrating through and the songbirds that blow in

for the summer.

Bird watchers compete to see which groups can spot the most bird species in a single day. The record? May 10, 1997, when an amazing 174 separate species of birds were counted in Tennessee.

If you follow a [map of bird migrations](#), you'll see that Tennessee lies directly along the route of the heaviest migrations.

Right now, birds are already on the move from South America, gathering along the northern coasts of Colombia and Venezuela and all along the Yucatan. Some have already launched off on their perilous flight across the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico over hundreds of miles of open water.

They'll touch down in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle, then move north in stages of up to 300 miles a day, coming through Cookeville and heading north. Some won't stop until they hit the northern shores of Canada.

From geese to hummingbirds, the heavy, winding stream of birds follows the heating of the earth and the insects that creates, an incredible journey most of us barely notice anymore.

One reason: They fly by night.

Those birds we see blasting through the trees, sweeping, darting, harrowing each other in aerial combat, most of them are just enjoying a day's layover. They're not staying. They're gearing up for that night's dangerous vault into the unknown.

Most birds actually migrate at night because there are fewer

predators aloft and the cooler, denser air gives them more lift and saves them energy. They'll need it.

The birds navigate by the stars. Insects are guided by the earth's magnetic field, but birds memorize a map of the night sky when they're young. They also may remember particular landmarks along their annual journey, soaring in the dark high over fields, woods and mountains and into the blazing haze of major cities, where towers and skyscrapers sometimes kill hundreds of birds that smack into them.

Storms kill others. Or blow them hundreds of miles off course. It's an incredible voyage some songbirds make ten times or more, nesting where their kind always has, making babies and then in late summer, reversing the tide and heading south again.

If you listen in mid-spring or late summer, you can sometimes faintly hear them passing hundreds of feet overhead, a mass of tiny birds, bobbing and weaving through the night. They call to each other to maintain formation and to keep from losing stragglers.

Then, by mid-October, it's all but over. The bird songs fade and, if you're out at night or just before dawn, all you'll hear are a few lone crickets that didn't get eaten. And then...silence again, all but the wind...