

HELLO, I MUST BE GOING

Continually crossing oceans and continents, these busy migrating birdies are equipped with mind-blowing stamina

Story and photography by Steve Ogle

FROM BUTTERFLIES to belugas, nearly all animals need to be on the move and we humans are no exception. Although we have a vast history of migration, our current migratory tendencies can be mundane, limited to firewood gathering and the odd climbing trip.

An inspirational migratory viewpoint comes from the bird's eye, for it's the avian world that best exemplifies the urge to get-up-and-go. Scientists call it *Zugunruhe*, or "an anxiety to migrate." Surfers have it and so do salmon, but the feathered kind take it to a higher level. What birds can do when they feel the wind beneath their wings is nothing short of astounding.

Barely perceptible, except for their familiar buzz, **ruby-throated hummingbirds** tip the scales with a mass equal to about three paper clips. These minuscule nectar eaters, like many migrants, have evolved to take advantage of a seasonal flush of resources available in northern summers, to which they migrate to maximize breeding productivity. With their wings fluttering at 75 beats per second, ruby-throats embark on

a non-stop, 24-hour flight across the Gulf of Mexico each spring and fall. Before bird banding and other research methods, this phenomenon was deemed physiologically impossible, leading early ornithologists to believe hummingbirds piggy-backed rides on Canada geese to cross the 800 kilometres of open water. Nowadays, after doing the math, we know they just point their beaks and go for it.

A slightly larger but no less impressive endurance flyer, the **blackpoll warbler**, is an inconspicuous songbird nesting in Canada's boreal forests. Once they produce about a dozen young, adults as far west as Alaska make a gradual easterly migration to the Atlantic coast — by night, as most songbirds do — using the stars for navigation. When they arrive, their specialized metabolism and foraging habits cause them to double their weight in fat as an energy reserve in preparation for departing on the shortest route between Nova Scotia and South America. If the winds are right, the non-stop journey of some 3,500 kilometres takes around four days and nights, entirely over the ocean.

It's impressive when you're 15,000 times more fuel efficient than a Toyota Prius, and this is the case for the **northern wheatear**, the real marathon flyer in the songbird category. The sub-population of this robin-like flycatcher, which winters in East Africa, flies annually across the length of Asia, up and over the Bering Strait to finally breed in the Yukon. It helps to spin a globe to visualize this: northern wheatears nesting on Baffin Island, on the other side of the Arctic, arrive from West Africa via Iceland. And incredibly, the Newfoundland population of wheatears employs a simpler strategy: they balk at all terrestrial prospects and simply fly straight across the Atlantic Ocean.

"As the crow flies" is not how most elegant migrants aspire to get around. The **bobolink** is a grassland specialist enjoying an endless summer by migrating between British Columbia's Creston Valley and Argentina, a return trip of over 20,000 kilometres. Instead of flying via the shortest route along the west coast, bobolinks make a stopover in the Caribbean, which scientists believe is an inclination to follow

ancestral flyways. But hey, being "free as a bird" has its merits, because Jamaica is pretty nice.

Most avian migrants spend half their lives in transit, but it's not all Rasta vibrations. Habitat degradation and hunting are threats to survival, among other pitfalls. Over 100 years ago, when flocks of eskimo curlews and passenger pigeons darkened the skies (both were hunted to extinction), one game warden in North Carolina reported that in a single season

over 720,000 bobolinks were killed by rice growers and exported as food. Though now protected with other migrants by international treaties, bobolinks are still shot as pests by Argentine gauchos and inadvertently mowed down by John Deere on the breeding grounds.

On the topic of migration, one cannot overlook the champion of all animals, the **arctic tern**, whose wanderings have been widely documented but only recently detailed. By monitoring those fitted with geolocators — low-profile devices that record sunlight intensity over time — researchers have traced the 80,000-kilometre annual journey of the arctic tern from Greenland to Antarctica. These birds, which over their lifetimes can travel the equivalent of three flights to the moon and back, do not simply flap around trying to find out-of-this world

surf breaks. Instead, they ensure the survival of their species by following a hard-wired, cyclical migration route that exploits global marine food resources throughout the year. Air miles rewards for this effort include shoulder rubs with polar bears one month and penguin rendezvous in the Antarctic the next.

Even within seasons, birds can undertake monumental journeys just to acquire food for their chicks. Slightly longer than a trip to the corner store, the **black-footed albatross** can lock its wings into soaring position and sleep while flying, which is useful for the 10,000-kilometre round trip between foraging grounds off Vancouver Island and nesting sites at Midway Atoll, 1,000 kilometres west of Hawaii. Once fledged, immature albatrosses fly around for years without ever seeing land.

Bird migration is an extraordinary example of the earth's complexity. Over millennia, while we humans have evolved to grow our own food and pay property taxes, the delicate bird world has persevered along its lofty course. Seeing them pass overhead instills a fleeting sense of what it's like to roam free and purposefully.

Steve Ogle is the lead bander at the Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory in British Columbia and a regular KMC contributor.



Two wayfaring Parasitic Jaegers sweep low over the Arctic tundra, following their *Zugunruhe* to southern Chile or Australia where they spend the winter.