

Unfaithful Birds



*Hooded Oriole — photo by Gerald and Buff Corsi
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The Robin is the state bird of Michigan — but not if patriotic Michiganders had it their way. As the state legislature was selecting its official bird some legislators argued that the Robin was a mere “snowbird” — appearing only in the summer. Such “infidelity,” they argued, should not be rewarded. It was instead the resident Chickadee that deserved the accolade, for it stuck by Michigan — rain, shine, or sleet.

Quaint as it now appears, the debate illustrates one common assumption — that our birds divide neatly into residents and migrants, with the migrants breeding ‘with us’ in our backyards, before dispersing to their wintering grounds in Central America. The reality, we are discovering, is more complex.

Many Hooded Orioles — summer breeders commonly found in the Watsonville sloughs, nesting in riparian areas and gardens, and especially where there are ornamental palms throughout California — migrate north to breed here in late March, and mostly disappear by the end of July. But where do they go? Not, as it turns out, to their wintering ranges. Instead, many Orioles migrate to a middle locale on the Western coast of Mexico — to the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, and southern Baja. And they appear there not merely as birds of passage, but to raise a second brood before moving even further south to spend the winter. In other words, instead of living their lives neatly — and disloyally — in two places, they inhabit three distinct regions. The unfaithful migrant just got really unfaithful.

Species with this migration profile are called migratory double-breeders, and they are a larger group than just the Hooded Orioles. Cassin’s Vireo, a common summer breeder in California mountains, follows a similar itinerant pattern, as does the Yellow Billed Cuckoo — a rare and highly endangered breeder of the now decimated riverine forests of the Central Valley.

The double-breeders have evolved to take advantage of the seasonal flush of insects, which in turn depends on Western weather patterns. By mid-July, three months into our summer drought, the forests of California are mostly bone-dry and thus can support very few insects; but this is precisely the time when the tropical deciduous forests of Western Mexico are leafing out in response to monsoon rains of July and August. Thus, double breeders have extended their potential by evolving two distinct breeding ranges at two very different latitudes.



Cassin's Vireo

We think in two’s: residents and migrants; summer and winter. What double breeders illustrate is that the very idea of a summer breeding range needs to be refined. And double breeding provokes other questions: are there regional populations of Hooded Orioles that choose to double breed in Mexico, while other populations remain to raise a second brood in California? Or are Mexican double breeders a different age group?