

The Outstanding Oriole Occupation of Beaverhill Lake

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Perhaps our favourite time of year is when the Baltimore Orioles reappear in the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area surrounding the Beaverhill Bird Observatory. Who can blame us, really? These brightly coloured nectar-feeders are immensely charismatic, and a vocal, orange-and-black herald that summer is right around the corner. In a typical year, we capture a small handful of them, typically between 10 and 15, during our migration monitoring operations. These birds are fitted with a uniquely numbered band, have some measurements taken, and are released back into the wild. This was not a typical year.

During the five weeks of spring migration, we banded not ten, not twenty, but a jaw-dropping forty seven Baltimore Orioles! On one day, we captured 18, a number equal to the total number banded in the previous year. Several of the orioles captured that day were recaptures that had been previously banded, but that might demonstrate just how many of those birds were within our monitoring area. For a period of several weeks, it felt like you couldn't go anywhere without seeing two or three or even four males chasing each other out of disputed forest territory, or hearing their chattering territorial call or their clear, melodic song.

And it's not just us. Most of our visitors that we've mentioned orioles to have commented that they too have seen an unusual number, or in places where they have never been spotted before. For some reason, the local population of orioles has skyrocketed.

Some brief investigation has left more questions than answers. Our early hypothesis was that last year was a particularly productive year, and that an unusually large number of orioles survived the winter. This would be signaled by a particularly high ratio of young to old birds, since around 70% of birds hatched in a given year don't survive that winter. However, now that the season's done and the numbers are in, we're finding that's not the case. Of the orioles captured, most of them were older birds that hatched some time before last year.

Maybe something happened on migration to push a larger than normal number of orioles this way? It's not uncommon for well-timed storms, wildfire smoke or unusual wind currents to push birds off their intended path and concentrate them in specific areas, but as far as we could tell this was a pretty ordinary spring with nothing that would move large masses of birds off course.

What if they all got the idea that this was just a good spot? Last year, the Natural Area had a severe infestation of leaf-roller caterpillars, which defoliated a good number of trees but are also a favourite food of most blackbirds, Orioles included. If they did come here to munch on an endless buffet of leaf-rollers, they'll be sorely disappointed, though. While we're seeing the signs of leaf-rollers on our trees, they have yet to become near as numerous as they were last year.

Another possibility opens the issue to the landscape scale: perhaps they visited elsewhere on their way north, but in the absence of suitable habitat continued further north than usual to central Alberta, which this year they found more to



their liking. Folks elsewhere in the oriole's breeding range may be concerned about the *lack* of birds. This speaks to the importance of monitoring bird numbers in many locations to determine if a decrease is landscape-wide or just a redistribution of birds in the available habitats from year to year.

Odd irruptions like this and the unanswered questions around them go to show the importance of this kind of long-term monitoring. One of the primary purposes of bird banding is to understand bird migration and how it changes over time, as well as to use our up-close looks at birds for valuable insights about their biology and survival from year to year. Exceptional years like this one are important data points, but ones that often leave a frustrating amount of mystery for years.

But then again, we're not really complaining. The bottom line is that we got to band forty-seven Orioles, and treat our visitors to many close up looks at these gorgeous birds.

