



*The Seeley Swan Valley's Weekly Community Newspaper*

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### **Colorful Summer Songsters Of The Swan Valley**

By Anne Dahl for the Eye of the Environment column

It's early June and most of the colorful, noisy summer residents have already invaded the Swan Valley. They've taken all the good sites along the stream banks and claimed the tree tops for themselves.

The Neotropicals are here, singing their baffling medley of trills and warbles. Many of the summer birds have flown all the way from Costa Rica to mate, nest and raise their families. They're making their homes on the edges of streams, lakes and wetlands and in dense forest stands. The Swan Valley's habitat diversity attracts these summer residents.

The tiny ruby-crowned kinglets arrived in April. I heard the first one on Earth Day. These olive-buff, 4.25-inch-long songsters are not much bigger than a hummingbird. They are the loud-mouths you hear singing all day long, usually from high in the tree tops where they are hard to spot.

The complicated song of the ruby-crowned kinglet starts with several tiny, barely decipherable notes that increase in volume and complexity and then end in a fortissimo cheaper! cheaper! cheaper! cheaper! cheep!

It took me several months to spot a ruby-crowned kinglet singing high in the top of a Douglas-fir. The males have a brilliant red-orange spot on top of their heads that you might see when they swoop down to fend off invaders. They are ferocious little men with their brilliant, tiny topknot feathers erect and reflecting the sunlight.

Now that I know the song, it amazes me how many ruby-crowned kinglets spend the summer here, considering we almost never see them. If you drive slowly down any of our forest roads with your window rolled down at this time of year, you can count a kinglet about every three hundred yards.

The yellow-rumped warblers arrived a few weeks after the ruby-crowned kinglets. These pretty little birds are about 5.5 inches long. Besides a yellow rump, they have a yellow spot on their throat and sides. This warbler rapidly repeats a single, soft note for about five beats. Then two more notes descend at the end—except sometimes the final two notes go up instead down.

These warblers can be heard on uplands, usually not far from water. They seem to like big trees and forest edges. The yellow-rumped warblers are easier to spot than the kinglets. Once you hear one, you can stand still for a few minutes and catch sight of it flying from one tree-branch sing-post to another.

On May 26, I heard the first western tanager. I haven't seen one yet this year, but it will be a special treat when I do. The males are canary yellow with black and white detailing and they have scarlet heads that seem to pulsate in the sunlight.

This is another species that amazes me with its numbers. Despite their brilliant colors, western tanagers can be hard to find. These 7.25-inch birds make their nests in dense evergreen forests, way up in the highest branches. Until I learned their song, I assumed they were rare in this part of the world.

Western tanagers also like to be near water. Forested lakeshores are good places to see them. The tanagers sing a short song that reminds some people of robins, except robins sing clear notes and tanagers sound like they are holding a little stone in their beaks. Furthermore, robins sing on and on (when you're trying to sleep), and they may vary their tune somewhat. But tanagers put long spaces between short bursts of a melody that doesn't change. Once you recognize the tanager song you can anticipate when it will sing again, based on the length of the pause.

The females and young western tanagers have yellow sides and olive backs. The olive color probably helps the females hide their nests from ravens and other predators that like a breakfast of eggs.

Sometime between the arrival of the yellow-rumped warblers and the western tanagers, the little common yellowthroat snuck in. These are the warblers that, according to the field guides, say "wichity, wichity, wichity." It's hard to walk near any of our hundreds of wetlands or along any of our low elevation creeks without hearing them. They like leafy willows, alders and red osier dogwood shrubs for their little nests.

Common yellowthroats look like they're wearing hokey black masks—as if they could hide their identity. Otherwise these little 5-inch birds are brilliant yellow with olive backs. If you are walking quietly near their nests they'll come out to scold and try to lure you away with a chuck, chuck, chuck call.

Another colorful spring arrival that likes brushy streamsides is the American redstart. Their squeaky little warbler song is hard to describe. It's like a high-pitched yellow-rumped warbler song gone whacky. But that won't help you much, because by the time the redstarts get here, the MacGillivrays, Nashville and Wilson warblers are here, too, and they all sing squeaky little songs and build their nests in the same kinds of places.

But the American redstarts are unique in appearance. The males are red and black, while the females are yellow-orange and olive. If you stand still by a bridge on one of our forest

roads, you might spot a couple of these little 5.25-inch warblers flitting back and forth to leafy shrubs across the water and the road.

As of this writing, I haven't heard the song of the LBJ (little brown job) with the beautiful voice: the Swainson's thrush. This non-descript little 7-inch bird with a white eye ring sings the most beautiful song in the forest. If you live near the woods and sit on the porch in the evening, I'm sure you'll agree. The Swainson's thrush makes a clear, one-note call and a weird, nasally rinnng sound. But it's the thrush's ethereal, flute-like song that seems to echo through the forest as it spirals up the scale that is so wonderful to hear.

These and other summer residents will keep on singing until their young have fledged. Then they'll head south sometime in early fall. They'll be missed when they're gone.