

The Atlantic Flyway

A flyway is a route regularly used by large numbers of migrating birds and the Atlantic Flyway is one of four major flyways in North America. The other flyways include the Central, the Pacific and the Mississippi. The Atlantic Flyway is a major north-south flyway for migratory birds in North America. Stretching from the Arctic tundra of Baffin Island to the Caribbean, the Atlantic Flyway spans more than 3,000 miles. The route generally starts in Greenland, then follows the Atlantic coast of Canada, continuing south down the east coast of the United States, then to the tropical areas of South America and the Caribbean.



According to Audubon, about 500+ bird species use the Atlantic Flyway. Millions of songbirds, shorebirds, birds of prey, and waterfowl follow the flyway every fall and spring. The flyway is not limited to birds alone, the route is also used by butterflies, as well as some species of bats and dragonflies.

Migration can be triggered by a combination of changes in day length, temperatures, food supplies, and genetic predisposition. Spring migration occurs in a mass movement within the flyway. It takes place over a shorter period than the fall migration since birds are anxious to reach their breeding grounds. March through May, you can see flocks making their way north across the United States. The fall migration season is a drawn-out affair. The travelers begin heading south starting in August and lasting through October, but some waterfowl can procrastinate until December depending on weather conditions.

Migrating birds use a variety of methods to navigate the flyway. Topographical cues, such as coastlines, river courses, and mountain ranges, help to guide the flight. Typically, species in the Atlantic Flyway migrate farther, making stopover sites critical to their journey. Migrating birds rely on these sites to breed, feed or rest, particularly along the east coast of the United States. The Chesapeake Bay and Susquehanna River form the single largest watershed on the East Coast and provide a variety of important stopover sites. Each site plays a critical role in migratory birds' survival.