One of the most joyous signs that spring is on the way is the arrival of migratory birds. Their return is often sudden: one morning the bushes and trees are filled with singing birds that weren’t there the day before.

Increasing daylight triggers hormonal changes that urge birds to begin migration. Most songbirds migrate at night. Following celestial cues and biological “magnets” they make this annual epic journey northward. Migratory birds battle exhaustion, predators, and storms to reach their breeding grounds. Each species has a specific, optimal time when they need to arrive in their breeding area. In many species, the strongest males arrive first and stake out the best territories, often in the same spot as the prior year. When females arrive, they choose the males who occupy the best territory for raising young. The pair build a nest, incubate eggs, and raise their young. Once the young are fledged the remarkable trip is reversed.

As spring begins to usher in returning migrants to your backyard, it’s time to prepare for famished arrivals. What to do? Begin by washing out your bird houses and bird feeders. Use a brush to do away with accumulated debris from wooden feeders and houses, hot soapy water works well along with some scrubbing. Don’t use chemicals because wood is porous and will absorb the chemicals. Rinse and dry the feeders thoroughly before refilling them with seed. To clean tube feeders, soak them in a mild bleach solution (nine parts water to one part bleach) and use a long-handled brush to clean the crevices. Be sure to rinse well. Feeders should be completely dry before adding seed. Don’t forget to rake up and remove seed hulls from your yard in the spring; decomposing hulls can kill your grass and spread disease to feeder birds.

Be sure to fill your feeders with plenty of high caloric foods for the hungry migrants who have just winged in from their southern wintering grounds. Foods like sunflower hearts, black oil sunflower, or seed blends with nuts, are extra rich in energy to replenish reserves depleted from their strenuous voyage north.