

OAA Spring 2010 Grade 8 Reading Item Analysis

A Fine Day for Flying Faith Hickman Brynle

- 1 If ever any animal needed a reliable weather forecast, it's a migrating bird. A storm can blow a bird far off its course, and severe temperatures, winds, or precipitation can mean death along the way. Since they cannot count on the weather bureau for information, some birds seem to have their own, built-in weather prediction system. Some even use changes in the weather to make their journey easier.
- 2 In autumn, many shorebirds and songbirds fly from the eastern North American coast across the western edge of the North Atlantic Ocean. Tim and Janet Williams at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania have observed the birds leaving from all along the coast, as far south as Miami and as far north as Nova Scotia. The birds first fly to coastal areas, where they fatten up on the plentiful food supply they find there. Then they just seem to hang around, waiting for favorable weather.
- 3 The Williamses have found that the best predictor for departure is the passage of a cold front. The front brings falling temperatures, clear skies, rising barometric pressure,¹ and (most important for the birds) winds blowing from the northwest. When these winds come, the birds rise into the air, all together, and by the millions. They depart from the coast and point their beaks to the south-southwest. They continue this orientation for the entire flight. The winds first push the birds out over the ocean to the southeast. But the wind direction changes when they hit the trade winds² of the Caribbean, and they are pushed back toward the southwest. Although they never change their direction of flight, they follow a curved path that takes them to their winter home in South America. Without the help of the winds, the birds would run out of fuel and perish somewhere in the South Atlantic.
- 4 The Williamses feel sad that these wonderful feats may soon become a thing of the past. "The great flights of shorebirds are gone forever," they say. "In the 1800s, shorebirds would pass over Bermuda in great flocks that stretched from horizon to horizon for more than 24 hours. Now, only a few birds can be seen over the islands. The songbirds and shorebirds are threatened by a loss of habitat in the south and breeding areas in the north." The Williamses hope that you will learn more from the American Bird Conservancy Web site.

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¹**barometric pressure:** atmospheric pressure measured by a barometer

²**trade winds:** weather systems with fixed wind patterns

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