

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 3
MAY 2021
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Saturday, May 8th Field Trip
Saylorville Visitor's Center at 8:00 A.M.

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, May 8th as we celebrate the return of migrating songbirds. Meet in the parking lot of the Visitors' Center at Saylorville Lake at 8:00 A.M. The main species we'll be searching for will be warblers, but there could be a great variety of nesting and migrating birds. Please dress for conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact Dennis Thompson at cnthomps@gmail.com or 515-254-0837 for information about field trips

Yellow-rumped Warbler
by Carol Berrier

Wow, what a way to start the day! A tiny bird sat in my viburnum bush on a chilly mid-April morning. Fumbling for my glasses, I assumed it was a favorite little chickadee. With clearer vision, the bright yellow patches on rump, crown, and on either side of his breast gave me all that I needed to know. The little bird was a male Yellow-rumped Warbler, and what a beautiful little fellow he was. His upper parts were blue-gray streaked with black and his lower parts were white. A black patch on his breast, shaped like an upside-down U, separated the yellow breast patches. The female is browner on top, but has similar markings.

Yellow-rumps belong to the Wood Warbler family of about 110 bird species found only in the western hemisphere. Fifty of those warbler species are seen in North America, most of them in migration from wintering in Central or South America to nesting in northern forests where they enjoy a diet of insects and spiders. Unlike their warbler cousins, yellow-rumps have an unusual ability to digest the wax coating found on berries such as bayberry, wax myrtle, juniper, and poison-ivy. This enables them to migrate earlier in the spring and stay later in the fall than many of their warbler relatives which need insects to survive. Most warblers leave for tropical wintering grounds soon after their fledglings are grown, but yellow-rumps usually stay and raise a second brood before their short migrations begin. Often, they winter in the southern United States.

Warblers are favorites among birdwatchers, and fall migrating warblers present real challenges for identification. When nesting is over, the fall molt leaves warblers with muted colors, and often an entirely different appearance.

Spring migrants are a joy to watch. Energetically inspecting emerging tree leaves for caterpillars, and singing all the while, they display their beautiful spring attire. On a lovely day in early May, a Midwest birder may see over twenty warbler species. I know from experience!

Eastern Wood-Pewee **By Carol Berrier**

The Eastern Wood-Pewee is a drab olive-green bird with two white wing bars. Sexes look alike. One might think that the wood-pewee was named for its size, but at six inches, this member of the tyrant flycatcher family is not the smallest flycatcher. Once we hear its song, “pee-a-wee, pee-a-wee, pee-ur,” we realize that the bird names itself! More of a whistle than a song, the concert begins before dawn and lasts until dusk.

Wood-pewees are late arrivals on their nesting grounds in the eastern U.S. Trees are leafed out by mid-May when the pewee looks for a site in a deciduous forest, park, or residential area, often returning to a previous site. While the male sings the female pewee builds her lichen-covered nest, usually twenty to thirty feet above ground in a large oak tree. And what a nest it is! Rarely seen by humans, it often straddles a dead horizontal limb well out from the trunk. Spider silk and lichens serve as camouflage, and from below it looks like a fungus. Although small and compact the nest holds three, and sometimes four eggs.

The pewee also forages in the tree tops, perching on a bare branch while waiting for wasps, flies, beetles, and moths to fly by. Interrupting its song, the pewee darts out to snap up an insect and returns to its perch. Ninety-five percent of the bird’s diet consists of insects. However, in spring and fall the pewee consumes a few berries as well.

The annual molt begins in late summer, and by late September the leisurely fall migration starts. Eastern Wood-Pewees winter in the Amazon and Pacific rain forests extending from Panama to Bolivia. They arrive during the October rainy season when insects are numerous and the native flycatchers have left their territories and gone south to breed. Each pewee of both sexes defends with song its own winter-feeding territory. Listen for them again in May.

Bird Nests in My Garage **by Carl Nollen**

I got the surprise of my life April 18. Intending to rummage through a metal cabinet in my garage, a little brown bird flew out. Next to a stack of old license plates, I saw a nest. Getting my flashlight, I discovered five babies, only a few days old. This was a dome-shaped nest, with a side entrance. What bird could this be? Too early for a house wren. I don’t have house sparrows. I came back awhile later and scared off a Carolina wren! It remained on the floor while I quickly retreated. But how did it get in my garage? I keep the doors down most of the time and some days don’t even open them. There are no broken windows. Then I saw its entrance, a chipmunk-chewed hole in the bottom door seal. Leave it to a Carolina wren. This curious, energetic bird will find a way. So, for a few weeks already it has brought in all its nest material by entering the garage dozens of times through the hole by the floor, laid its eggs, and hatched them. My garage, dark with closed doors, is this wren’s secret and completely safe hideaway. I will keep the doors closed since it is used to this “habitat,” and hope its brood is successful. Those darn chipmunks have earned their reprieve. And I will continue to enjoy the Carolina wren’s mate’s loud calling from many places in my yard every day. I have forgotten what I was looking for in the cabinet. Whatever it is, I will get along without it.

I have had other birds nest in my garage. For two years I had rough-winged swallows nesting in the rafters. Two years ago, a phoebe used a ledge by the roof. When I discovered their interest and nest-building I kept the doors open to accommodate them. I have had to discourage the wood ducks, however. They think my chimney is a hollow tree and can’t get out. My house and garage face a ravine and a small pond. This seems to help attract certain species.

I keep a yard full of brush piles, viney tangles and brushy spots. This pays off. Every fall and through the winter I marvel at all the bird nests I see in these places that I didn’t notice in the summer. I keep the brown thrashers, catbirds and cardinals happy.

There is one species I have trouble helping. Robins have a problem. A squirrel can get to about any place a robin chooses to build its nest. They have taken to nesting in bushes here, one year in a lilac, another year in a honeysuckle. This is not ideal. This spring I put up an open shelf with a roof on the side of a metal sided shed and hope a squirrel can’t get to it. Other than a downspout that bends toward my house, I don’t have any other option for the robins that come here. What do other bird lovers do to help robins in their squirrely yards?

Those “Darn” Cormorants By Gary M. Nelson

Is the poor fishing in some of Dassel, Minnesota’s area lakes due to those “darn” cormorants? Dassel is located 55 miles west of Minneapolis. No says the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. It is due to changes in land use management practices. I visited with a former neighbor the last time I was in Dassel. He blamed the poor fishing in area lakes on the cormorants.

Yes, the cormorant is a fish-eating bird. So are gulls, terns, kingfishers, diving ducks, pelicans, herons, egrets, shorebirds, bitterns, eagles, ospreys, and mergansers along with raccoons, otters, mink, and bullfrogs. This post is based on scientific facts, not the occasional observation of a cormorant flying overhead with a crop full of bullheads.

The double-crested cormorant was once an endangered species in Minnesota. The widespread use of the insecticide DDT drastically reduced populations of many fish-eating birds in the United States including bald eagles, ospreys, pelicans, and cormorants. DDT is a persistent pesticide. It does not degrade in a bird's digestive system. It accumulates in the food chain to a concentration that may be 10,000,000 times greater in birds than in water. Such high levels in birds cause neurological damage.

DDT also blocks the hormone estrogen in birds, which can result in thin eggshells that fracture easily. DDT was banned from use in parks, croplands, gardens, and orchards in 1972 by the Environmental Protection Agency. Fish-eating bird populations rebounded quickly. Bald eagle populations soared from 4,000 birds to over 1,000,000 birds in the U.S. Cormorant populations exploded.

Cormorants primarily feed in shallow lakes. Crop content studies of cormorants by the Minnesota Department Natural Resources reveal that they primarily predate on carp, bullheads, suckers, chubs, and small panfish that are adapted to shallow murky lakes. Rarely do they find a walleye in a cormorant's crop. Walleyes generally suspend themselves in deeper lakes that are not frequented by cormorants.

Fisheries biology is very complex. Healthy fish populations are determined by over 100 factors, not just one factor such as the presence of predatory birds. Some of Dassel’s area lakes are heavily polluted with sediment and agricultural fertilizers. Low oxygen levels and algal blooms typify these lakes. Spawning habitat is nonexistent. These lakes just do not have the water quality and habitat to support healthy fish populations.

One hundred years ago farming was much more diversified. Half of the landscape was in marsh, hayfields, small grains, pastures, and the “Big Woods.” Use of commercial fertilizer was nonexistent. Runoff of soil was held in check by the diversity of farming practices.

Today, vast monocultures of just two crops, corn and soybeans dominate the landscape in rural Dassel. Soil erosion and runoff of fertilizers is rampant. Heavily fertilized lake lawns contribute to the problem. Lake lawns should never, ever be fertilized. Lakes choked with sediment and algal blooms cannot support a walleye fishery regardless of the presence of cormorants.

The cormorant is a gentle sea and freshwater bird. I marvel at the long lines of cormorants that fly over my sister’s house in Dassel.

*Gary Nelson retired from Des Moines Area Community College and was the former editor of *The Warbler* for Des Moines Audubon Society. Gary and his wife Cindy Nelson now live in Wyoming, MN. This article previously appeared in the Raccoon River Watershed Association’s email newsletter and is used with permission of the author.

"Then migrating warblers, lemon-colored, whirled down along the frail branches till I could hardly tell which were leaves and which were birds. I sat down on roughened ivory grass to follow the warblers with my field glasses. Scores of tiny birds, gay and quaint, making evanescent compositions among the laced twigs."

-- Florence Page Jaques, (1890 - 1972) author

Tyrannus tyrannus by Carol Berrier

In mid- July last year our Westshire neighborhood was visited by an Eastern Kingbird that was attracted to the red-osier dogwood bushes growing near the southern end of the upper pond. The white berries were ripe on bushes that grew from seeds that were probably dropped by birds a decade ago. The Eastern Kingbird is a member of the Tyrant flycatcher family. This eight-inch bird has a black back, wings, head, and tail. Chin, breast, and belly are white and there is also a white band at the end of its tail, which helps in identification. A red crown patch is seen when the bird is excited. The sexes look alike.

Eastern Kingbirds are easy to spot, for they use a sit-and-wait method of hunting their favorite food, flying insects. Choosing an easily accessible perch, such as a dead branch, they can watch for passing insects and burst forth, returning to their perch with their prey. Eastern Kingbirds' heads and bills are large, and the bill is flattened. Strong jaw ligaments allow the bill to snap shut on a large flying insect, and whiskers at the bill's base help in the capture. As the summer progresses, berries are added to the diet.

The female, with help and protection from her mate, builds a bulky nest often over water. While she incubates 3-5 eggs, the male (with red crown erect), aggressively defends his territory of about one-half acre. If a larger bird, such as a crow, hawk or raven happens to fly over the nest site, the male kingbird attacks it from above, sometimes 100 feet in the air. Diving and striking the intruder's back over and over again, the kingbird makes sure that it leaves the territory. Eastern Kingbirds raise only one brood, and both sexes feed and care for the young.

As the young birds mature, the parents revert to their gregarious natures and join flocks which increase in size as the time nears for migration. Migration peaks mid-August to early September, and by mid-October the birds have reached northern Chile and Argentina. Starting back north in March, Eastern Kingbirds arrive in their northern breeding sites in early May.

THE WARBLER
VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 3
MAY 2021
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
9871 LINCOLN AVENUE
CLIVE, IA 50325

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



**Nonprofit
Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 1142
Des Moines, IA**