



The Redstart

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J. Harold Olsen, Editor

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BEHAVIOR OF CERTAIN WOOD WARBLERS AT THE NEST

by
John and Polly Handlan

Those who participated in the 1940 Foray of The Brooks Bird Club at Lost River State Park, had splendid opportunities to observe wood warblers. The five days of actual field work in the Park permitted us to explore only a part of the 3,800 acres in the Park boundaries and two of these five days were marred, to a degree, by hard rains. The latter did not, of course, prevent us from continuing field work but did make observation considerably more difficult.

Sixteen species of Compothlypidae were noted in the Park and of this number ten species are marked "common" or "abundant" in our field notes. The dates of these observations, June 16-21, inclusive, appeared to be advantageous ones which struck, on an average, between completion of first nestings and beginnings of the second nestings of various species. For example, we noted well-grown young of the Chestnut-sided Warbler, but witnessed also, completion of nest-building and egg-laying of this species.

Occupied nests of seven species of wood warblers were found by members of our party and two additional breeding records were established for birds of this family with young which obviously were just from the nest.

Olsen (1) already has published records of wood warblers listed and breeding records established. However, we submit for what they may be worth, our own observations as to the behavior of wood warblers at, and near, their nests. There is nothing new, to be sure, in the instinctive desire of birds to conceal the nest, nor is it new that, once the nest has been discovered, these same birds should do their utmost to decoy or frighten intruders from the nest or the vicinity of newly fledged young. Nevertheless, certain species of the nesting birds observed followed so closely respective patterns of behavior that it seems worthwhile to record them.

Worm-eating Warblers, Helmitheros vermivorus, and Golden-winged Warblers, Vermivora chrysoptera, shared a common anxiety before the discovery of their nests. One nest of the first-named species and two of the Golden-wings were located chiefly because of the tendencies of these ground-nesting species themselves to betray the nest locations. Literally, birds of this species flew to meet human intruders near the nest locations - but refused to accompany the nest-seekers after they had passed the nests!

The single nest of the Parula Warbler, Compothlypis americana, which was found was at least 80 feet above ground at the tip end of a branch of a magnificent Hemlock. As if conscious of the inaccessibility of the nest location, the adult birds paid little attention to humans who watched, from a sloping hillside above the nest, the adults feeding well-grown young.

Mrs. Handlan, on June 17, 1940, found a small, compact nest under construction in blackberry bushes near a Park residence and only two feet from a drive regularly used by motorists and pedestrians. Eggs were deposited on June 20, 21 and 22 before a party which remained an extra day in the Park identified and photographed the nesting bird - a Chestnut-sided Warbler, Dendroica pennsylvanica. The nest owners managed to evade detection despite intermittent observation for parts of four days.

Only a single nest of the Oven-bird, Seiurus aurocapillus, was found, although the species was abundant in the Park and numerous families was observed out of the nest. The occupant of the nest located did her best to conceal its location. The nest was found entirely by accident when its occupant flushed from it when John Handlan almost tramped upon it as he watched a small fly-catcher nearby. On three other visits to the vicinity, the nesting bird broke from cover silently, twice stepping from the nest to run a few feet in the heavy undergrowth before taking wing to a nearby place of concealment.

At one of the two nests of the Hooded Warbler, Wilsonia citrina, which were located, a bird feeding well-grown young gave a remarkable demonstration of an effort to conceal the nest. Five observers were searching the undergrowth along a Park trail for young of the Oven-bird which had been noted in the vicinity. After nearly ten minutes search, Dorothy Conrad pointed out to others of the group what she at first believed to be a bird entangled in shrubbery and hanging head down. At her direction, a member of the party raised her head and found her eyes less than a foot from the "entangled" bird which thereupon righted itself and flew away, a female Hooded Warbler. The bird had been feeding young in an especially deep nest. We did not see her move, although five of us were thoroughly scouring the ground and undergrowth within a few feet of her for ten minutes. We believe she was in the act of feeding well-grown young when we appeared and that she instinctively preferred the concealment of suspended motion, head down at the nest though she was, to flight.

Another nest of this species contained two eggs of the Cowbird, Molothrus ater, the only example of parasitism we found in the Park during our stay.

The four nests of the Redstart, Setophaga ruticilla, which we found varied in location from a 60-foot height in a Chestnut Oak to one found in shrubbery

less than two feet above ground. Redstarts exhibited to us a uniform tendency to go direct to their nests regardless of the presence of observers. This species was, by far, the easiest to observe at the nests, once a nesting locality was reasonably well established by observers. The birds paid comparatively little attention to intruders. This species shared with the Black and White, Golden-winged and Chestnut-sided Warblers and the Oven-bird the distinction of absolute abundance in the Park, even quite close to the dwellings there.

Families of the Black and White Warbler, Mniotilta varia, and of the Louisiana Water-Thrush, Seiurus motacilla, were observed on various occasions, the young in each instance obviously just from the nest and unable to fly more than a few feet. The conduct of the parent birds of the two species was quite different. Black and White Warblers seemed as unconcerned as any other species we saw when young birds were closely approached, exhibiting a fearlessness (or stupidity?) greater than any other species observed with young. The Water-Thrushes, on the other hand, rapidly hustled their young into hiding, upon the first approach of "trouble" embodied in human observers and long after the families were screened from our sight, the sharp alarm notes of the adults were heard.

The Worm-eating Warblers and Golden-winged Warblers, once young were discovered, were very demonstrative, examples of the latter species, particularly, approaching within inches of the faces of observers, darting at them so closely that their wings fanned the intruders' faces, and doing their utmost to decoy observers away from the young.

Most spectacular of the exhibitions were performed by the ubiquitous Oven-birds. One or both of each pair observed with young out of the nest feigned injury - fluttering on the ground in a make-believe of helplessness, dragging "injured" wings, and becoming noisily apparent in any and every place in which the young had not concealed themselves. Elsewhere, we previously had observed identical behavior from another species of the genus, the Louisiana Water-Thrush.

On one occasion Clyde Upton and John Handlan stood back to back for more than ten minutes while an Oven-bird deliberately took advantage of every available bit of cover as it quietly circled the observers three times (the circle with a diameter of about 15 feet as we subsequently checked it) all the time carrying food in its beak. The same way the same two observers spent more than an hour watching a pair of Black-throated Green Warblers, Vermivorus pinus, alternately carrying food and, presumably, feeding young, without betraying the location of a nest.

Such other warblers were noted as the Yellow Warbler, Dendroica aestiva, the Black-throated Blue Warbler (Cairns Warbler?), Dendroica caerulescens, Cerulean Warbler, Dendroica cerulea, Blackburnian Warbler, Dendroica fusca, Prairie Warbler, Dendroica discolor, and the Yellow-breasted Chat, Icteria virens.

No breeding records were established for these last species which, presumably, breed within the Park or its immediate environs. In the Park itself we found no Yellow-throats, Geothlypis trichas, nor did we note the Magnolia Warblers, Dendroica magnolia, we had expected to find there.

As has been indicated, we found no time completely to survey the Park's considerable acreage, particularly its higher levels with altitudes up to 3,200 feet. We hope sincerely to be able to return to the Park for a longer period in another year and in the course of our time there to establish still more breeding records for the territory's population of wood warblers.

- (1) Olsen, Harold, "A Preliminary List of Summer Birds of Hardy County, West Virginia, THE REDSTART, Vol. VII, No. 12, pp. 68-75, August, 1940. (The Brooks Bird Club, Wheeling, W. Va.)

---91 Lynwood Avenue
Wheeling, W. Va.

GENERAL NOTES

The 1940 Christmas Census:

As listed in the chart of activities reproduced in the last issue of THE REDSTART the ninth annual Christmas Census of The Brooks Bird Club will be carried out by the members and their guests on Sunday, December 22, 1940. The participants will meet in the clubroom at the home of Russell West, 113 Edgewood Street, Wheeling, W. Va., at 9 a.m. sharp.

The observers will be assigned to the several territories to be worked, and instructions given for the listing of species of birds, numbers of individuals for each species, locations, temperatures, and other pertinent information required to complete this record of bird life.

Originally, our census was taken only in Oglebay Park, but in recent years, it has been enlarged to include the area along the West Virginia side of the Ohio River, Wheeling Island, and "bird hill" in Marshall County, W. Va. It will conform to the rules prescribed by the Bird-Lore magazine and will be published, along with hundreds of other reports from representative sections of nearly every state in the Union, in that journal's "Forty-first Christmas Census Supplement" in January, 1941.

It must be remembered that the idea of a Christmas Census is to sample bird populations rather than to build up long lists of species. It is not a game in running up species lists but a scientific poll of the species and numbers present. With the eight years samples of bird life in Oglebay Park as a background, we are now enabled more accurately to picture the changing populations of birds in that area.

Guests of club members are very welcome to participate if they care to do so, the corresponding members of the club are especially invited to be present for the census. The hikers are reminded that they should be prepared for sudden changes in the weather, and, to bring sandwiches and thermos bottles of hot coffee for their lunch. The groups will reassemble in the clubrooms following the completion of the census to exchange reports and to enjoy an informal party while the lists are compiled for publication.

A Week-end Trip to Morgantown, W. Va.:

On Saturday, November 30, some 25 members and friends of the Club met in the camp owned by Frank E. Connor that is situated by Cheat Lake, near Morgantown, W. Va. The corresponding members residing in that city had asked the group from Wheeling to visit with them on that week-end, to take part in the party planned for that evening, and, on the following day, to hike in the mountains surrounding the lake. The territory there, on Sunday, December 1, was particularly barren of bird life and the few birds noted on the surface of the lake were not identified.

An Informal Science Course:

A series of informal lecture-demonstrations dealing with the physiology of the bird will be sponsored by The Brooks Bird Club in January and February. Jas. T. Handlan, Jr., a charter member of the Club, will have the course in charge. Meetings will occupy one hour each on six to eight consecutive Tuesday nights at the Clubroom, 113 Edgewood Street. Mr. Handlan has volunteered his services and the course is open to any member of the Club, free of charge. Dates will be announced in the January issue of THE REDSTART.

EDITORIALSSeason's Greetings:

The active members of The Brooks Bird Club join with the editor of THE REDSTART in extending to all, their very best wishes for a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

May we also, at this time, extend a cordial invitation to visit with us at any and all activities arranged for this coming year. Plans for the coming year are rapidly being completed and it is the earnest desire of each of the officers that as many corresponding members as possible participate in them.

If, in the event of your being too far away to attend, why not become active insofar as the writing of notes, if not for publication in this, your journal, at least for your friends who will meet in the Clubroom. In that way we will know something of your interests, the trips taken or planned, and your opinion of the program of the Club. You will receive a reply from either the Club officers or from some local individual who seems most interested in the things of which you write. The Club frequently sends out bulletins of particular interest to the members, and as a result of this correspondence, you will be included in the proper mailing lists to receive the notices and publications.

So here's to an active corresponding membership during 1941. May you enjoy, more than ever, your connection with The Brooks Bird Club.

FIELD NOTES

Parasitism:

On June 6, 1940, I found, in the vicinity of Stackyard Hollow near Wheeling, a nest of the Red-eyed Vireo, Vireo olivaceus, that contained three eggs. Three days later when I visited the nest it contained, in addition to the three, an egg of the Cowbird, Molothrus ater. After some hesitation, I removed the Cowbird egg to allow, I hoped, the young Vireos to be properly fed after they hatched, and not to be crowded out by the larger and stronger young of the Cowbird. Two days later, a friend of mine reported that the Vireos had hatched and seemingly were in good condition.

I made another visit to the nest on June 13, a week later than my first visit, and found that the young birds were gone, and in the nest was another egg of the Cowbird. It was cold, and that fact coupled with the fact that I could not find a Vireo, or hear the call of one in that vicinity, led to the assumption that the adults and young had abandoned the nest.

Two other instances are called to mind concerning parasitism. The first, on June 16, 1940, at Camp Agaming on Big Wheeling Creek in Marshall County, W. Va., when a vireo was seen fluttering from post to post of a fence, with food in its bill, and followed each time, by a young Cowbird that was several posts behind. The vireo kept this up for some time before it flew into the dense foliage, followed by the Cowbird, and both were lost to my view.

One week later, near the same spot, I found another nest of the Red-eyed Vireo that contained, along with three eggs of that species, three eggs of the Cowbird.

---George Breiding
National Road, Fulton
Wheeling, W. Va.

A Band Return:

On May 14, 1940, a small bird flew into the home of Mr. John M. Thayer of 818 Glendale Avenue, South Charleston, W. Va., and was caught. Mr. Thayer copied the numbers from the "little metal band around its leg" and sent them, together with his report to me. In reply to my letter to the Biological Survey in Washington, I received the following report: "The bird carrying the band No. 34-61199 was a Chimney Swift, Chaetura pelagica, banded August 30, 1938, in Charleston by I. H. Johnson."

---Clyde B. Upton
Hubbard Court
Charleston, W. Va.

COMMUNICATIONS

To the Members of The Brooks Bird Club:

Practical application of the theory of group freedom often involves abridgment of individual liberties. It involves, too, occasional action which moves toward objectives of the group at the sacrifice of old privileges, loyalties, associations and personal friendships of members of the group.

These seeming paradoxes have been experienced by The Brooks Bird Club since, a year ago, the Club publicly reaffirmed its status as a self-governing organization, free of threatened outside domination. Perhaps there still exists in the minds of some Club members an honest doubt of the wisdom of this course of action. However, in the light of sober retrospect most of us can see that, had we not acted as we did, the very existence of this organization was seriously threatened.

We regretfully sacrificed the advantages of professional leadership and other privileges for the sake of independence and self-respect, as well as the continued existence of an organization in which we sincerely believe. Our sacrifices seem to have been eminently worthwhile.

The pages of THE REDSTART reveal that we have kept in mind that our principal interest, as an organization, is in the ornithology of West Virginia and its neighboring states. Our monthly meetings, our field trips and our week-long camping expedition of 1940 testify to the same purpose. We found time, also, to increase our membership steadily, if slowly, to secure necessary items of equipment by gift or purchase, and to conduct successfully the annual nature reunion at Wheeling. Similarly, during the past year, The Brooks Bird Club has taken over the activities programs of the West Virginia Nature Association and of the Alumni organization of the Association, by mutual decision of the three groups involved.

Most impressive of the year's accomplishments, however, is one which is not readily apparent to those whose personal contact with The Bird Club program is necessarily limited. The active members of the Club have learned to stand squarely upon their own feet. Without any financial subsidy and without a penny paid for professional leadership, they have carried out projects which many friends of the organization believed impossible of accomplishment without professional assistance.

This Club's active membership has imagination, courage and sheer "drive" and, furthermore, has learned it can draw upon itself for more than a fair measure of individual ability and leadership in management of a nature study program. However, this membership is far from being self-satisfied, far from the assumption that things done could not have been better done. It will do its best to make the coming year the best in the history of the organization and solicits the help of all members toward attainment of this goal.

For the year to come, we wish happiness and success to the members and friends of The Brooks Bird Club, with the additional hope that they may continue to derive self-development and pleasure from their avocational interest in bird study. Good hunting!

John W. Handlan, President
The Brooks Bird Club