



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Warblers make birders' hearts sing during weekend conference

Thursday, September 13, 2007

James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

Nonbirders probably won't understand, but I'll try my best to explain why 250 birders turned out for a weekend event dedicated to fall warblers.

The two-day symposium at the Lakeside resort on Lake Erie was more like a love-fest than a dull ornithological conference. It featured a succession of rousing tributes to these tiny, colorful songbirds delivered by some of North America's top stars of birding.

"How do I love thee?" We provided plenty of responses to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's classic question.

Most of all, we love warblers for their bright and colorful plumages.

"They're part of the tropics that have come to North America to enrich our lives," said Victor Emanuel, founder of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours and the keynote speaker at Saturday's dinner. "They turn up unexpectedly and they're always a surprise."

We love warblers for their twice-a-year visits to Northeast Ohio, in the spring and the fall, when they brighten our woodlands and bring joy to our lives.

Jon Dunn, author and editor of several birding field guides, explained that 38 species of northbound migrating warblers follow three separate routes, touching down in Florida, Texas and Louisiana. But their paths converge in Ohio.

"Virtually every warbler you can see here," said Dunn, a former Dayton resident now living in California. He leads warbler-watching tours to Ohio each May. "You live at ground zero for the spring migration."

Field guide author Kenn Kaufman grew up in Kansas and spent decades in Arizona, but has lived the past three years in Ottawa County, Ohio, a stone's throw from the warbler Eden of Magee Marsh Wildlife Area.

"There's just so much going on here during the migration season," Kaufman said. "I love being in this area."

And we love warblers for their remarkable strength and adaptability.

Elliot Tramer, a University of Toledo professor who has studied warblers in the tropics, said you have to admire a bird that weighs less than an ounce, yet can survive a 4,000-mile round trip through storms, predators and loss of habitat.

"This is a tremendous undertaking for such a tiny critter," he said.

The most common warbler along the North Coast last weekend was the blackpoll. This amazing boreal breeder returned to Northeast Ohio dressed in a drab suit of greenish yellow, headed eastward for the Atlantic Coast. From there it will launch itself over the ocean, where it will catch a tailwind and not stop

flying until it lands in South America - a trip of 2,700 miles lasting more than 80 hours.

In a few weeks, the black-and-white warblers we saw will be joining mixed feeding flocks of ant birds and golden-crowned warblers in Central American rain forests.

The bay-breasted warblers we enjoyed here will eventually switch their diets from insects to fruit during the tropical dry season, Tramer said. Tennessee warblers will establish territories in flowering trees, from which they will extract nectar and glean insects.

Talk about amazing creatures: a bird-bander netted the same Kentucky warbler in the same thicket in Panama for eight years in a row.

The warbler-watching at the symposium didn't end after the sun went down Saturday night. Bill Evans, an authority on nocturnal avian calls, led more than 50 of us to the end of the Lakeside pier to test our ears and identification skills. Before a downpour sent us running for cover, we heard the chip calls of Swainson's, gray-cheeked and veery thrushes, bobolinks and magnolia and Blackburnian warblers.

Sightings

It seemed as if every park on the lakefront was alive with migrating songbirds on Sunday. My son, Bret, and I birded Lakewood Park, Huntington Beach Reservation and Elmwood Park in Rocky River, where we spotted 15 species of warblers: Tennessee, Nashville, yellow, chestnut-sided, magnolia, Cape May, black-throated blue, Blackburnian, palm, bay-breasted, blackpoll, black-and-white, American redstart, Wilson's, and Canada. Baltimore orioles, Swainson's thrushes and veeries, red-eyed and warbling vireos also made appearances.

Gabe Leidy, birding Conneaut Harbor, found some fabulous shorebirds, including a ruff, willet, white-rumped, Baird's and stilt sandpipers.

Headlands Beach State Park experienced an unprecedented fallout of hundreds of blackpoll warblers, Ray Hannikman reported. Jerry Talkington saw a golden-winged warbler. Sightings at Mentor Lagoons included veery, gray-cheeked and Swainson's thrushes, red-breasted nuthatch and American redstart.

At Wildwood Park in Cleveland, Nancy Anderson spotted seven warbler species, including blue-winged, and a scarlet tanager. At Sims Park in Euclid, she saw a Northern parula, black-throated blue and black-throated green warblers.

A Philadelphia vireo at the Shaker Lakes was a nice find for Ben Fambrough.

Gayle Nagy spotted an orchard oriole at a feeder in her Brunswick Hills back yard.

The red-breasted nuthatch invasion continued last week. Ken Meder had several visit his feeder in his back yard in Middleburg Heights. Also, Cindy Ondercin welcomed several to her home feeder in Strongsville.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

© 2007 The Plain Dealer

© 2007 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.