

SOME NOTES ON AMERICAN WOOD WARBLERS

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I have had opportunities to serve in three widely separated areas of the American continent and to observe some of the migrant bird species. In 1965 I was lucky enough to spend nine months with the last British battalion to be stationed in British Guiana (now Guyana); since then I have visited Belize several times and the British Army Training Area, Suffield, Canada. I have thus had good opportunity to see some migrant species throughout much of their range.

Wood warblers *Parulidae* occur only in the Western Hemisphere; though they have similar habits and fill a similar niche in the bird world, they are distinct from the Old World warblers *Sylviidae*. About 120 species are known, of which some 60 are to be found in the USA and Canada, there being nearly twice as many in the eastern as in the western American states; of these, all but four have been recorded in Belize. With a few exceptions, wood warblers are inhabitants of the woods and forests, though on migration they may be found in the more open areas.

Wood warblers are almost exclusively insectivorous and are therefore highly migratory. The length of migration varies, with some, such as the Pine Warbler *Dendroica pinus*, travelling only a short distance from the southern edge of their breeding range, whereas the most northerly of breeding Blackpoll Warblers *Dendroica striata* migrate from Alaska south to Guyana, Venezuela and Brazil. Wood warblers are, apparently, largely nocturnal migrants (Bent 1953), though at Suffield at dusk on several autumn evenings I saw straggling companies composed of a number of species tumbling from the sky into the trees and bushes of the coulees that run down to the South Saskatchewan River. These mixed flocks, with adults in their nondescript winter plumage and young birds in duller colours, present considerable problems of identification in the field. In summer, wood warblers are a delight with their exquisitely coloured forms.

The main influx of wood warblers to Belize is usually during the second half of September, though some species, notably the Black-and-White Warbler *Mniotilta varia*, arrive as early as August. Most of the early arrivals may escape detection except in the more open areas around Belize airport and Holdfast Camp. By October, the mixed flocks are common, particularly in the first two hours after dawn when they are especially active. They capture their food in a variety of ways. Some species, such as the Magnolia Warbler *Dendroica magnolia*, are restless and sprightly as they flit tirelessly from branch to branch in pursuit of tiny insects, taking their prey from the more exposed parts of twigs and leaves. The Myrtle Warbler *Dendroica coronata*, the only warbler I noted in Belize which apparently ate small berries, though it preferred insects, was also the only species that self-flocked; small groups wintered and fed together near the coast but other species were usually seen in small mixed flocks or as individuals.

One of the few winter visitors to be brilliantly coloured is the American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*, which flashes as it whirls and dances from branch to branch, darting up before it floats, leaf-like, downwards. I note that the Cubans refer to it as "Candelita" — the little torch. Others are gleaners, carefully exploring the undersurfaces of leaves or crevices in the bark. None can be more readily thus

described than the conspicuously marked "creeper" — the Black-and-White Warbler. It is more catholic in its choice of habitat than the other wood warblers I saw. I found it in the hills, in jungle and mountain pine, and in the coastal lowlands of Belize. Several wood warblers, like flycatchers, capture a large part of their food on the wing. Of these, Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla* is one of the few to be seen both at Ralston, Suffield, and in Belize. As a rule, wood warblers are arboreal, but many are thicket-haunting. The Yellow-Breasted Chat *Icteria virens* is one such which seems rather out of place among the wood warblers; its favourite resorts are the dense tangles and thickets that grow on low ground about the borders of ponds and swamps, such as the sewage treatment plant at Ralston or along the muddy streams of the Belizean lowlands.

Both the Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis* and the Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla* are terrestrial. The former is one of the few wood warblers to be fairly common in Guyana as well as Belize. It threads its way like a mouse as it walks among the fallen leaves or even wades up to its knees in shallow pools, like a sandpiper, as it searches for aquatic insects and grubs. The Palm Warbler *Dendroica palmarum* has no liking for woods or even trees in the open. Its taste takes it to the roadsides, gardens or, for preference, the cays which lie off the coast of Belize. It has the nervous peculiarity which, irrespective of family, seems to affect some birds for, as though life were a matter of beating time, it never ceases to wag its tail. Herklots (1961) listed just over a dozen wood warblers that might be seen in Guyana, of which three were South American breeding species. The only northern migrant species I noted, in addition to the Northern Waterthrush, was the Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia* which looked all too like a "wild canary". It was to be found in small numbers in the gardens and hedges of the sugar estates, particularly at Enmore. The reason that the South American tropics are not an important wintering area for the northern migrants may be that there are suitable winter quarters extensive enough further north.

Before departing for their summer breeding areas in spring, the drab winter dress is shed and the males are in full nuptial attire, so bright and gay that their departure will deprive the area of some of its most beautiful birds. As I only had the one spring in Guyana, my notes are necessarily inadequate but the Yellow Warbler appeared to depart towards mid-March. Further north in Belize most species linger on until late April. Indeed, it is usually only in April that the spring moult is completed. With the brightening of their plumage comes a change in their vocal ability. Generally speaking, they have weak voices and rank low as songsters. In winter all we hear are faint lispings 'tseeps' which attract attention to their animated flitting forms. With the arrival of spring, a few of the males begin to practise their remarkable though not very musical vocal talents in readiness for their arrival on their breeding grounds. The most frequently heard are those of the Myrtle Warbler and the Yellow-throated Warbler *Dendroica dominica*, a bird that seems fairly common around the villages and plantations but which did seem to disappear rather earlier than the other migrants.

Notes of this nature can not begin to do justice to the almost limitless possibilities in the study of this family. In a flock of wood warblers you never know what rare

species you may find and whether when in Belize you may not have seen it some 8,000 kms to the north when on training at Suffield or Edmonton.

References

BENT, A.C. 1953. Life Histories of North American Wood Warblers. **US Nat Museum Bulletin No 203.**

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