

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF NESTING YELLOW WARBLERS

When I first started birding many years ago, I wanted to find as many new birds as possible. Now I concentrate on studying birds instead of just watching them. In 1992 I began efforts to locate nesting birds within about five miles of my home in Providence. One such bird was the Yellow Warbler.

I found a Yellow Warbler nest at the East Providence Reservoir. The area consists of an expansive open old field vegetated with tall grasses, sedges, wildflowers, and small clumps of bushes adjacent to the reservoir. The edge of the field is surrounded by tall mixed hardwoods. This habitat contains nesting Northern Orioles, Orchard Orioles, Warbling Vireos, Red-Winged Blackbirds, Gray Catbirds, Northern Mockingbirds, and Yellow Warblers. On May 17, 1992, I saw a female Yellow Warbler fly to a low honeysuckle bush. A male Yellow Warbler sang in a nearby tree. The female left the bush after a minute or so and flew back and forth to the same spot several times. I approached this bush and found a partially constructed nest made of dry grass and plant fiber. The incompleated nest was basket-shaped and only about two feet from the ground but was well camouflaged.

Two days later the nest was nearly complete. It had a long conical-shaped bottom. The sides of the nest contained some soft white plant fibers, especially along the inside at the top. I studied the nest only for about thirty seconds and then left so that the birds would not abandon it. I watched the nest site from a concealed spot located about fifty feet away. During this time, the female was actively gathering nest material from aspen trees along the edge of the field. She used fluffy catkins from the aspens to line the nest.

On May 20 I found the nest destroyed and pieces scattered throughout the honeysuckle bush. I took up my usual observation spot and started watching again. The female had begun another nest in a honeysuckle bush about three hundred feet from the original nesting site. This second nest was about six feet up from the ground in the center of the bush.

The next day I watched the female carry grass to the nest. Five days later I returned to the nest and found two eggs. One egg was off-white, with heavy brown mottling and roughly two centimeters long. The other egg was light blue green, wreathed in dark brown, and a little over one centimeter long. The larger egg was that of a Brown-headed Cowbird, which deposits its eggs in the nests of other birds. Dan Finizia, who was with me, removed the egg because cowbird chicks compete for the food brought by the warbler, and often the warbler chicks do not survive.

On May 31 I found two more cowbird eggs, one that had been buried under

new nesting material. Yellow Warblers apparently build a new nest bottom on top of unwanted cowbird eggs, thereby leaving the buried egg improperly incubated. The nest still contained only one warbler egg, less than the expected four to six eggs. I removed the one cowbird egg that was on top and left the buried one.

On June 2 there were two warbler eggs and yet another cowbird egg, bringing the total of cowbird eggs laid in this nest to four. I left this cowbird egg. A week later the female warbler was sitting on the nest, and the male warbler was nearby singing.

I returned to the nest area on June 12 and June 14 and watched from a distance. On June 18 I found a newly-hatched cowbird chick in the nest. The next day I found a Yellow Warbler chick in the nest. One warbler egg still remained unhatched.

On June 21 the male Yellow Warbler, always located in the same mulberry tree about twenty feet from the nest, sang whenever I approached the nest, and stopped singing when I remained at a distance and sitting down, perhaps a warning to the female.

On June 25 the warbler chick's eyes were open, and the other warbler egg was still unhatched. I removed the cowbird chick in order to give the warbler a better chance of survival.

Finally on June 28, about nine days after hatching, the young warbler was gone. The second warbler egg never hatched, and the buried cowbird egg was broken. I studied the nest itself and found it to be about ten centimeters long, constructed of dry grass, with plant fibers including aspen catkins inside the nest. I also found fibrous weed seeds similar to dandelion fluff in the nest.

The nest site produced only one Yellow Warbler chick, which I believed fledged, and had four cowbird eggs. I thoroughly enjoyed studying the nesting behavior of these birds. Instead of listing birds, try sitting in one spot and watching the birds around you. Chances are that you will become a better observer and a more skilled birder.

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