

THE WORM-EATING WARBLER CONNECTION

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

Recently, Ted Atkinson called to say that Bird Observer wanted an article about the Worm-eating Warblers that have summered in Weston for the past two years. (Actually, there is evidence that they have bred in the same location for some 15 years!) At first, I declined, mainly because the breeding site must be kept secret, much to the chagrin of some good friends (I hope still!).

But then the June, 1976, issue of American Birds arrived, with the lead article entitled "Birdwatching etiquette: the need for a developing philosophy," by Richard L. Glinski. Though this topic is not new, Mr. Glinski places it in modern perspective--that of a rapidly growing corps of jet-set birders who are preoccupied with building up a List. "The impacts of such pursuit," he writes, "no doubt vary with the species observed and the time and location of the observation: thousands of birders were able to witness with a minimum of disturbance a wintering Ross' Gull as it fed along a coastal shore in Massachusetts, yet a small fraction of that many people along Sonoita Creek during the nesting season of the Five-striped Sparrow could diminish the reproductive capability of this species in Arizona and the United States."

Thus, I was prompted to explain my reasons for keeping secret the nesting site of the Weston Worm-eaters. I hope that anyone who observes breeding of a rare species will disclose the location only to those who need to know, such as Dick Forster of Massachusetts Audubon Society, and who can keep the secret.

Point 1: For species at the limit of their normal breeding range, very subtle changes in habitat may be of paramount importance for successful nesting. Such areas are apt to be small, fragile, and may accommodate only one or two pairs. Thus, it is crucial that human interference be kept at a minimum.

Point 2: This "colony" of Worm-eaters, in particular, may yield some interesting facts concerning the life style of this species. For example, I have had the impression that their song slows down as summer progresses. Also, are there preferential breeding locations within this special bit of woods? How many breeding pairs can it support--and will the numbers of birds increase? Why do Dark-eyed Juncos (birds at the southern limit of their range) breed in the same habitats as the Worm-eaters?

As yet I have answers to none of the above. That may require years of observation. If the area is disturbed, I shall never know, and in that respect my motive for secrecy is very selfish.

But what about the birds themselves? Don't they deserve some protection? Glinski concludes: "There can be no room for the over-zealous listers who are oblivious of everything but a field mark, and who unknowingly may run over a nest while attempting to see the 'white bar in the wings.'" These people take from the sport of birding much more than they are able to give, for they can never develop a concern for

birdlife as quickly as they can collect check-marks on a field list.
(Italics mine.)

Those with whom I have birded realize that I enjoy a "great" bird as much as anyone. Yet, I maintain that to "know" a bird is to see it when it is on its breeding grounds--that crucial period from which new stock will come. For a rare species, to disclose its haunt is to do disservice to both the bird, who wants to live there, and the birder, who may never see the progeny from that successful nesting. The prize of one year should not be at the expense of the future.

Postscript: What I have learned is summarized in my log for June 27, 1976: "Today I saw both adults ... they were giving sharp single chips, not unlike a weak Cardinal. The birds also seemed much less secretive than before, going repeatedly from ... to I frequently heard a series of liquid chips ... from begging young, probably two in number. Then I saw the young being fed--they appeared to be motley versions of the adults, with some remaining down on the head breaking the black stripes." Two days later I worked the same site--the adults were present but much less evident. Apparently, once the young fledge the show is over, for I never saw them again.

WORM EATING WARBLER



photograph courtesy of Massachusetts Audubon Society