

THE WARBLER WORKSHOP AT THE
JUNE 1964 EBBA MEETING
Reported by Eva F. Schnitzer

The Warbler Workshop at the June 1964 EBBA meeting, under the guidance of Chandler Robbins, was keyed to the dominant theme of all this year's workshops, the ageing and sexing of birds.

In his introductory remarks Mr. Robbins emphasized these points :

1. Knowledge on the ageing and sexing of warblers is the accumulation of a decade of observation and classification by many individuals. The guide in the 1964 Workshop Manual, pp. 25- 37, is the summation of this accumulation.

The attempt by the bander to memorize every detail is not only unnecessary but also nigh impossible. Nevertheless, every bander is urged to familiarize himself thoroughly with the guide so that he will be able to use it expeditiously in the field.

2. The immediate goal is the refinement of what is already known so that more precise criteria can be established that will hold good in ageing and sexing the fall warblers.

3. The ultimate goal is the establishment of criteria in ageing and sexing spring warblers. The separation of the adult from the subadult in spring is the high water mark in hand identification.

Mr. Chandler was emphatic in pointing out, however, that proper identification of the species is the first and foremost essential; that although only 35 warblers are regularly encountered in the east, the bander really must be familiar with 140 birds, 35 each of adult and immature males, and of adult and immature females. To complicate the picture further, western stragglers and southern wanderers often turn up in the nets and traps so that alertness for the unusual is also necessary.

Misidentification, he said, is an unpardonable sin. Not only are incorrect records filed but valuable information is lost. How often, he asked, has a bander, ringing myrtles by the score in the fall, passed by an Audubon's warbler, which may appear here, because he was not quick to recognize the westerner which so closely resembles the myrtle? Being able to separate warblers into their proper genera and species should precede ageing and sexing.

To do this properly it is necessary to have on hand an adequate number of excellent resource books with definitive illustrations.

Mr. Robbins referred to p. 37 of the 1964 Workshop Manual, but especially recommended the following five as basic:

1. Chapman, Frank M. (1907), *The Warblers of North America*. Book out of print. May be obtained in second hand book shops. Well worth price if obtainable. Pictures particularly helpful.
2. Forbush, Edward H. (1929), *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States, Part 3*. \$5. Available from Secretary of the Commonwealth, Boston, Massachusetts.
3. Griscom and Sprunt (1957), *The Warblers of North America*. \$15. Expensive but excellent pictures, a valuable aid.
4. Roberts, Thomas S. (1932), *Birds of Minnesota, Vol. II*. Particularly valuable for descriptions of juvenile plumages. Out of print, but keys and descriptions, separately printed as a manual for identification. Available at \$3.50 from Minnesota Museum of Natural History, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Indispensable reference for banders though not written by Roberts with banders in mind.
5. Field Guides: Peterson's, Pough's, State Guides, etc. It was cautioned that field guides are essential for identification of species though inadequate for ageing and sexing.

The provocative question: "How do you know a warbler when you see one?" led to a listing of the following characteristics which in combination add up to a warbler:

1. Nine primaries
2. Very active generally
3. Small
4. Bill straight and sharp, not hooked or notched; exception #683, chat
5. Bright spring colors, much yellow
6. Wing bars, very often
7. Insectivorous as a whole
8. Highly migratory
9. Normal tail shape, no peculiarities
10. Complicated song pattern
11. Rictal bristles; exception #681, yellow throat
12. Young do not molt primaries in the fall; exception #683, chat

In identifying a warbler, the family placement is the first consideration. Is it a warbler? Then, its genus is determined. Observe and note:

1. Bill - size, shape, any peculiarity
2. White spots in the tail - present or absent
3. Wing bars or patches - present, absent, how conspicuous?

For example: vermivora have short thin bills; dendroicae have white in the wings; etc. The species identification follows quite readily thereafter, and only then are ageing and sexing in order. The following remarks were made:

Ageing and sexing require much practice to acquire skill and accuracy. This takes time. Guess work is valueless. The bander is encouraged to keep personal records but is cautioned not to submit records to Patuxent if there is any uncertainty. No record is preferred to an incorrect one.

The guide in the workshop manual can be a helpful tool if put to use. Mr. Robbins warned that the first trial with it might be difficult but that familiarity will soon make for ease in handling it.

Plumage observation, measurement, ossification - these three, all three, are necessary to age and sex a bird safely.

Measurements overlap so caution must be used. Only the extreme measurements can be relied on to determine age and sex without occasional error.

Ossification generally is determinative. The warblers are the most readily done, the sparrows next. The brown creeper is an especially easy bird to do.

Identification sheets on individual species will be distributed as soon as preparation is completed. Revisions will appear in EBBA News as soon as they are made.

Mr. Robbins' lively presentation resulted in an animated work session. The opportunity to examine the many warbler skins on exhibit further enhanced this most instructive workshop.

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Editor's Note: Chandler S. Robbins' "A Guide to the Ageing and Sexing of Wood Warblers (Parulidae) in Fall" may be found in the 1964 Workshop Manual, Vol. III, pages 22 to 37. The Manual may be obtained from Miss Wilde Kellenkamp, 223 Matsonford Road, Radnor, Pa. Price: \$1.25.

