



Brunswick Wildlife “Swamp” Warblers

The Wood-Warbler family of birds are small and very colorful, the jewels of North American birds. Many of you might associate them with northern forests or mountain areas like the Blue Ridge Parkway where most breed. However, Brunswick County hosts several warblers that migrate to Central America, South America and the Caribbean Islands for the winter. Two are “swamp” warblers that return to breed in the swamps and forested wetlands of the southeast and Mississippi River watershed, including our area.

The yellow guy above is a Prothonotary Warbler. It got its name from its bright yellow plumage which resembles the color of robes worn by papal clerks (prothonotaries) in the Roman Catholic Church.

The other guy is a Swainson's Warbler. No flashy plumage...and no fancy name...its scientific name appropriately means “marsh warbler.” Its English name, however, was given to it by none other than John James Audubon who named it for his friend, fellow ornithologist William Swainson.

Prothonotary Warblers breed in cavities that are readily available in swamps, many abandoned by woodpeckers plus naturally created cavities. They are the only Wood-Warbler east of Arizona that nests in cavities. Being born in a cavity over water is certainly safer from predators than most nesting locations; however, when the young leave the nest (fledge), their first flight may include a splash down in the water. Not to worry...the fledglings can swim up to forty-five feet using their wings!

Swainson's Warblers are relatively rare and secretive, building cup nests about three feet off the ground in thick understory...in tangles of vines and cane. They generally forage by shuffling through leaves. Unlike the Prothonotary that regularly has two broods per summer; the Swainson's has only one. Both species will re-nest if the first brood is destroyed.

These birds were photographed in wet habitats along Governors Road. The Prothonotary was photographed over the bridge on Rices Creek. By late April, there are usually a couple of males doing aerial dogfights over the bridge. They seem to have territories on separate sides of the bridge but that does not stop them from chasing each other. They seem to enjoy it! It is after all their role to protect the nest.

Both warblers have experienced population declines. These two species have specialized habitat needs on their breeding and wintering grounds so the greatest threat to survival are habitat degradation and destruction in our country, such as the logging and conversion of bottomland to cropland, and the destruction of mangrove habitats in South America.

Brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds is generally a result of habitat degradation. Cowbirds do not build their own nests but lay eggs in the nests of many species...to be incubated and reared by hosts such as our two warbler friends. Often the host's clutch of eggs is partially destroyed by the cowbird.

Fortunately, the Prothonotary is relatively tame and will use artificial nest boxes. Nest box programs are being instituted across their breeding range to increase diminished local populations by providing more cavities similar to Eastern Bluebird nest box programs you may have participated in.

The Swainson's is very difficult to study because of its nesting sites; therefore, little is known about the magnitude of their population decline. It has, however, also suffered from loss of habitat and cowbird parasitism.

Want to observe these guys? On Brunswick County creeks and rivers such as Town Creek, Rices Creek, and Lockwood Folly River, listen for males singing from arrival in April until June or July. Listen for the male Prothonotary Warbler's song, four or five ringing notes, each sounding like "sweet".

Finding a Swainson's is very difficult because of its niche and behavior; however, its strong song may give it away. Listen for a song with the English translation of: "see see see SISTerville". If you are fortunate enough to hear it, seeing it is almost impossible...but worth a try.

See you in the swamp!

John Ennis

