



# KELLY'S CORNER

by Jan Kelly



## Warblers

We often hear the word *sanctuary* used to explain the geographical and spiritual place Provincetown holds on this planet. Whether for personal freedom, an interest in geology and natural history, a bohemian desire to flee the mainstream or some new wave investment, Provincetown presents itself. The last wave may leave her a quasi ghost town and fill up many of her beautiful patches of nature, but because we are 73% National Seashore, we are protected from a total bulldozing.

Space matters on so many levels here, and only one of those levels is human. While we occupy ourselves on Commercial Street and in our living quarters, an ever ongoing world exists parallel to ours, unaware of us and our goals until we step into its territory. The wildlife, the weather, the geographical changes—on a more subtle level, the passing of the days, nights and seasons, all operate on a naturally clocked time, uncomplicated to them, unknown to many of us.

One of these natural cycles fitting into the whole defines the warbler migration. Warblers, tiny songbirds weighing three pennies, sport yellow as a predominant color. Their beautiful shape, color and song cannot simply be glanced over once spotted without leaving a great impression. We birders hope they are impressed enough to continue an individual study into the history of these beautiful bits of nature. We get to study them intensely for just little over a month each year—May—and we are so fortunate that warblers choose eastern New England as a flyway. Luckier again are Provincetowners. The warblers need our protected beech forests on their flyway

and use them as a source of food—mostly insects.

Safe in the sun then, and safe in a nor'easter. The trees, shrubs, undergrowth and ponds all offer a haven for these robust bits of fluff who have flown thousands of miles to return to the northern climes. What is the incentive? Procreation of course. The nuptial plumage, so brilliant to us after a winter filled mostly with blackbirds provides ocular relief and joy. The song is so welcoming after a winter filled mostly with the cacophonous sounds of the winter population. Would be interesting to have a monitor on someone lifting their binoculars and spotting a warbler... How that must put peace in the heart and add years to one's life!

There are about 100 species of warblers. They winter in Mexico, the Caribbean, Central and South America. About half use the northern climes as their breeding grounds. We may see half of those. Warblers are diverse, most eat insects, larvae, pupae and adults. The water thrush adds crustaceans, snails and minnows to its diet and the Cape May Warbler adds fruit and nectar with a tubular tongue. The Cape May can also pierce grapes and drink the juice and can take advantage of the holes that sapsuckers drill into a tree. The yellow-rumped can digest wax and that's why you will see them present where Bayberry abounds.

The wax serves as fuel for the yellow-rumps in cold weather, as suet does to those species at your bird feeder, but the diet consists mostly of insects, which explains why you can spot the warblers flitting in the trees, darting and stopping, especially in early morning and at dusk. They feed on hatching insects and must be just a bit faster than they are in order to feed.

Warbler watching is an action sport. You have to be as quick as the warbler to get your view. Your ears need to attune beyond the average. Forget machines or dis-



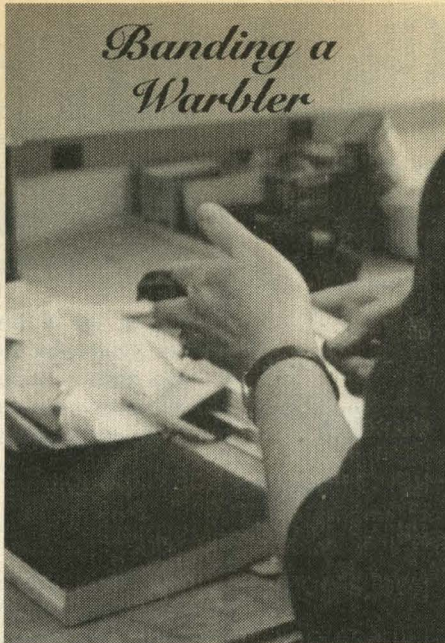
tractions, focus only on the sounds of nature and pick out one high-pitched song. Separate it from all the other sounds and thus identify the species. Next, find it and have a look to cinch your identification. Sounds difficult? Not really. Practice and some simple tools help.

The video "Watching Warblers" by Michael Male and Judy Fieth can help. Seeing and hearing the bird on the video also helps. Seems like instant knowledge to those of us who first just "listened in the woods" and read graphs of monitored songs. Then an L.P. record came out, and tapes, and CD's of bird songs. All of them useful, but the combination of eye and ear learning leaves the other tools collecting dust. I play the Stokes CD Field Guide of Songs at any time or at any activity. With only a month to spot as many species of warblers as time, weather and birds will allow, one must be as attuned as possible.

Some warblers continue north to nest, mate and fledge, but some do so right here on Cape Cod. The Yellow, Pine, Prairie, Yellow Throat, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, Black & White, Redstart, Black Throated Green, Blue-Winged and Nashville are among those that nest here. They have arrived and you may see and hear them, but May is truly showtime. The best prime, nuptial plumage and the songs attract a mate and this takes a lot of style and energy. You know... you've done it.

After they do mate, their nest will hold an average of four motley eggs. The female lays one egg a day and when all four have appeared, incubation begins. Incubation by the female

## *Banding a Warbler*



takes 5 to 12 days. No pampering, they fledge all at once. Most warblers have only one brood, but the Black-throated Blue may have up to three broods in a year.

While warblers may live 10 or 11 years, in actuality most live only 2 to 5 years. Banding allows this knowledge. The recuperation rate on banding remains low, but the importance of returning a banded bird—whether found dead or alive—remains high. Be sure to return a banded bird should you ever find one... thank you.

And so, give yourself a present this spring. Go to the beech forest in early morning or maybe at dusk to join fevered birders from all over the Cape, and also spanning out from all over New England, the country and the globe. I always make new friends during warbler season. You will be surprised and pleased to find how this simple activity can add so much to your life. Combine interest, a pair of binoculars and a guide book, then add the CDs and the video as well as selections from this list of resources. —Happy Birding.

### **May Schedule**

Each Saturday and Sunday—8:00am Beech Forest Parking Lot. Join the Cape Cod Bird Club for a warbler walk. No fee. Different leader daily.

Wednesdays 6:30 am Audubon naturalist Jackie Sones leads a warbler walk—modest fee.

## *Birders Taking a Break and Notes*

