Warblers might travel thousands of miles to build a nest. Illinois birders don’t have to travel far to spot these winged warriors.

The Warbler Way

Story and Photos By Laurie Smaglick Johnson

The “smaaack” of bodies slamming into each other in mid-air revealed the male prothonotary warbler’s resolve to defend his nest site. Wrens and woodpeckers alike—any cavity nester that ventured near the warbler’s territory—clearly understood they were entering claimed real estate. This instinctive, often brutal, battle for survival of species played out in early May at the Pecatonica Forest Preserve in Winnebago County. That’s when the prothonotary warbler attempts to nest in its watery woodland habitats. But not always with success. In the end, just days after the prothonotary chicks hatched, a wren would sneak into the cavity when the adults were out foraging and peck the young to death.

Birders recognize these life-and-death struggles as part of nature’s checks and balances. Not every nest is a success, and not every bird survives. Still, witnessing the spectrum of avian display is part of what draws people outdoors to active birding habitats, especially during peak migration periods.

Throughout the spring and summer, the wood warblers that migrate to and from the eastern United States and Canada are back home to raise their young. Thirty-eight unique and colorful species of these neotropical migrants wing their way through the Americas east of the Great Plains. Many of them nest in Illinois, and with a little luck, virtually all can be observed during migration—if you know when and where to look. The extreme length of Illinois offers a wide variety of habitats, making war-
defending his long and narrow stream-side territory for several hours over a two-day period. He chased away would-be competitors and sang intensely from every available perch within 10 feet of the ground, hoping to attract a mate. Most of the time, he stood directly in the stream where he could alternately advertise for a mate and exert little energy while stabbing his meal.

With their distinctive black hood, the hooded warbler is aptly named.

Three of the other less common warblers that nest in Illinois, the Louisiana waterthrush and the Kentucky and hooded warblers, can be found at the Palisades, as well as many locations in the southern part of the state.

The hooded warbler also needs large stands of forested habitat in which to raise their young. A well-developed shrubby understory is required, and in it they disguise their nest. The Louisiana waterthrush, by contrast, hides its nest in the bank of a fast-flowing stream, but still in the deep shade of a mature forest. The Kentucky warbler likewise needs dense shaded forest and seldom shows his beautiful yellow feathers because he is so averse to coming into the light.

Tucked quietly into my blind, I once observed a Louisiana waterthrush defending his long and narrow stream-side territory for several hours over a two-day period. He chased away would-be competitors and sang intensely from every available perch within 10 feet of the ground, hoping to attract a mate. Most of the time, he stood directly in the stream where he could alternately advertise for a mate and exert little energy while stabbing his meal.

Without a doubt, one of the most difficult warblers to find in Illinois is the Swainson’s. Locating and observing this bird demands great character on the

Never far from its chosen stream, the Louisiana waterthrush (below) forages there for its favorite tidbits. Seldom seen out of the shadows, the Kentucky warbler (right) can be difficult to observe.
Many of the most common species of warblers nest in Illinois. Among them are the American redstart, common yellowthroat, northern parula, ovenbird, black-and-white warbler, pine warbler and yellow warbler. Although less common, the blue-winged, prairie, worm-eating and yellow-throated warblers, and yellow-breasted chat, also nest in the Prairie State.

Wood warblers are the jewels of the avian world. They are barometers of their respective habitats, their numbers mirroring the overall health and balance of the land. One rarely finds these beauties at the window feeder, save the occasional pine, yellow or yellow-rumped warbler. Forays into their specialized habitats are necessary to locate and observe them. The trip itself, however, does not guarantee an encounter.

Recognizing their songs and calls, knowing when to expect them, identifying their microhabitat needs, interpreting clues they begrudgingly leave you, and invoking infinite patience are the skills and discipline necessary to begin to understand and appreciate these special creatures with which we share the earth.

A colorful character in both feathers and personality, the yellow-breasted chat produces a disjointed chorus of “caks and caws” that you will never forget.

The Swainson’s warbler (left) is a “find” for anyone who enjoys bird-watching. The American redstart (above) is perhaps the most recognizable of the warblers with his striking black and orange contrast.

Laurie Smaglick Johnson is the author of Silent Conversations with Eastern Wood Warblers, an intimate photographic look into the lives of the 38 species of warblers that migrate through the Americas east of the Great Plains. For more information, visit www.thrushhaven.com.