

Days with the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and the Prothonotary Warbler

GEORGE H. STUART, 3RD

To ornithologists who have been frequently in the southern Atlantic states these two species—the one sprightly and the other so wonderfully gorgeous—are doubtless very familiar, but as our experience in those regions had been limited to the late autumn, it was with keen expectancy that we headed for one of their most northern habitats on the Atlantic seaboard.

Although in each case the breeding-ground of these birds extends up the Mississippi Valley almost to the river's source and into a portion of southern Ontario, the southern tip of New Jersey and Delaware mark their northern limit east of the Alleghanies.

In the Spring of 1915 Dr. Spencer Trotter and the writer determined, if possible, to locate not only the birds, but their nesting-sites as well. Accordingly in early May we entrained for one of the localities where both varieties had been reported. The country at our destination was flat farm-land for the most part, with scattered woods of pine on the dryer surfaces. The streams which drain this level country naturally broaden into wide swamp areas, which are covered with a heavy forest of deciduous trees and undergrowth—greenbriar, holly and poison-ivy—deterring even the most enthusiastic from penetrating many parts of the tangled bogs. But it is here, and particularly about the edges of the small ponds, out of which the silvered skeletons of old trees protrude, and in the little vistas, that one must look for these species.

Taking advantage of the long twilight upon our arrival, we hurried into the nearest woods with the hope of having a glimpse of one of these birds. Entering a thick tangle of green-

briar and grape vines along the edge of a stream which meandered through the deep damp forest, almost tropical in its appearance, the notes of many familiar friends greeted us; White-eyed Vireos, Carolina Wrens, Cardinals, Titmice and Wood Thrushes, perhaps most prominent, in addition to the general list of warblers in the vanguard of migration. Soon there broke forth within a few feet of us the loud call which so much resembles that of the Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers. Thinking that it might be a Prothonotary, we crept carefully around a large gum tree and there on one of the lower branches, peering somewhat in the manner of a vireo, was our bird, the most striking of all the warbler family and of whose praises so much has been written. As the sunset glow through the trees struck his gorgeous yellow plumage, we felt repaid for any effort expended in the search. Mosquitoes soon reminded us that further investigation should be postponed till morning, so we contented ourselves with this glimpse, and dreamed of Gnatcatchers on the morrow.

No one should be indoors after four a. m. on a May morning, and the mosquitoes, in alliance with a nearby Barred Owl, proving effective prompters, all hands were up at the break of day. A magnificent concert was in full career; the cool air, ruffling the surface of a nearby pond, on the margin of which budding willows and willow-oaks gave a charming Corot effect, made one wonder why they should wait till sultry August for a holiday. We were remarkably fortunate on this fine day; for no sooner had we reached the edge of the woods across the stream, where grew tall ash, elm and gums fringing the meadow, than, at the report of a shot, fired at a Redstart high among the branches, we saw the unmistakable form of the little Blue-gray Gnatcatcher flit across an opening in the trees. It was incessantly active for a moment and, following it with glasses, we saw it alight on a small dead branch of an elm directly overhead and settle on its nest, carefully placed near the base of the branch protected from above by a main limb, some thirty-five feet from the ground. Its momentary fright at the shot, so near, had passed away and the bird sat close, showing only its long tail projecting over the deep-rimmed cup covered with lichens.

The appearance of the cock was soon announced by strange high-pitched wiry notes resembling much the cry of some young bird.

The nest, which contained five fresh-laid eggs, was shaped like a high cone, exceedingly deep for its width, the depth within being $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches, lined with small feathers from some good Plymouth Rock on the nearest farm. It was secured only after considerable maneuvering which required the cutting away and lowering down of a section of the main limb. The eggs, of the customary pale blue, varied considerably in size and shape from pointed to rounded oval, with profuse and lightly spotted specimens. To one interested in bird architecture this small member of the feathered tribe will attract the admirer's attention as can few others, for not even the Hummingbird can excel the ingenuity and beauty of its workmanship. Twice later in the day, although the wind had risen somewhat, we were attracted by the peculiar squeaks of the Gnatcatcher, and observed a male in the tree-tops and closer search would have doubtless revealed the nest.

On three other trips¹ during the season we discovered their homes through having our attention arrested by their feeble cries. All the others contained young—one built in a swamp maple in woods which had been partly cleared, far out on a horizontal branch some fifty or sixty feet up, and another in a yellow birch sapling growing out of the water, in a crotch on the main stem and almost at the top. The parents seemed excellent foragers, returning to their young with food alternately every three or four minutes.

In the same swampy country and always bordering on the water the Prothonotary makes its home. Bearing the distinction of being the only warbler to occupy the interior of an old branch or stub, the bird has many traits to fascinate the observer. The clear loud call, or the beautiful warbled song, resembling that of the Water-Thrush—which, however, we were only fortunate to hear uttered once during all our visits—the ball of gold, as

¹ Mr. Stewardson Brown accompanied the writer on the second expedition, and Mr. Samuel Scovill on the third.

he appears flying across the water from shore to shore just above the Spatter-docks (*Nuphar advena*) seeming as though one of their bright flowers had veritably taken wing, the apparent indifference, with which he regards your presence when you think you must surely be at his front door,—all combine to give a visit to his haunts unusual charm.

Many were the old woodpeckers' borings and rotted knot holes examined, but without result, until in our discouragement we began to realize that the Prothonotary enjoyed a considerable period of freedom before settling down to family cares. Although a second visit some two weeks later rewarded us with a view of mating birds, they would not reveal their nesting site, and it was not until the third trip in June, after a fruitless morning following apparently this will-o-the-wisp, that we finally succeeded in locating a nest. On this occasion another unsuspecting friend volunteered his companionship and was pressed into the service of galley slave in the leakiest homemade batteaux that ever floated, with inverted and very unstable horseshoes for oar-locks.

While drifting idly along, a Prothonotary, which we followed in its flight, went straight to a small hole in a live willow eight feet above the water and disappeared within; presently he reappeared, hesitating at the entrance for a moment, and then flew off again. In a state of ecstasy the faithful slave overcame all obstacles, the tree was reached, and climbing to the nest we found a brood of youngsters probably three days old. The nest, which was in the abandoned cavity of a Downy Woodpecker, placed about four inches below the entrance, was composed of bits of moss and fine strips of bark. The willow was not large and its rather sparse foliage afforded a very light screen, but taking up a comfortable position within four feet of the entrance we awaited developments. The cock soon returned with a small green worm and alighting near at hand, eyed us with interest, but apparently without any nervousness. After some shifting about, including several attempts to reach the hole, during which he could not quite decide to enter before an intruder at such close quarters, he finally braved it, slipped in, fed the youngsters, reappeared at the entrance, looked about him with

perfect composure and flew away for more supplies. Soon he returned with a May-fly, hesitated for a second, then went straight to work and never faltered thereafter during the forty minutes in which we remained glued to the spot, witnesses to the most intimate relations of this fascinating bird and hungry brood and in the closest proximity it has ever been my good fortune to be placed. In that space of time this devoted parent carried in some six or seven worms, two May-flies and a beetle, and twice removed cases of excrement as he came out. The hen at first did not appear, and when she did with a worm, exhibited much excitement, and although she made several advances toward the nest, her courage failed and she would shy off, uttering constant chipping notes of alarm. Her actions in no wise daunted the brave little cock, who continued about his duties unflinchingly. It seemed extraordinary that courage inspired by parental devotion should have been thus shown so much more strongly in the male than in the female, from whom it naturally would be expected.

Once while thus posted in the willows, a Yellow-throated Vireo lit almost on my shoulder, and his surprise at meeting us in such a sequestered spot and his subsequent panic were most amusing, for it was not long before he concluded that it was wiser to put more space between us.

Passing on in a further search amongst the willows, our attention was attracted to a movement in the crevice of a dead stub which projected from a live tree. Within the tiny hole fifteen inches above the water, something like a mouse seemed to be revolving. It proved to be the tail of a bird, and presently the head of the owner appeared and out popped a female Prothonotary to our profound astonishment. Within was a nest carefully built of moss, bark strippings and grasses about ready to receive the eggs. After a wait of two or three minutes, the bird returned with a small piece of grass, which she carried in, performing again the same revolving antics. Here at last was the prospective chance of finding a nest of eggs, but it involved another expedition, so we withdrew and reflected with satisfaction upon the experience of the day. It had indeed been one of ample reward and one not to be forgotten or soon repeated.

Notwithstanding that this last discovery provided a more definite attraction than at any time previously, no one could be found to reinlist, and when our host, a patient man, who had controlled his feelings during these several descents upon him, heard that another was proposed, his curiosity gained the upper hand and he modestly inquired if the purchase of his farm was contemplated.

Much as the writer shrank from the trip alone, the previous difficulties in finding the eggs emphasized the wisdom of following up this opportunity. Accordingly on June 19th, although the real-estate transaction was not concluded, he had the satisfaction of seeing four rather round glossy white eggs, heavily marked with lavender, in the crevice of the little stub.