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A WARBLER YOU CAN HEAR BUT SELDOM SEE

by

William L. Finley and Ed F. Averill

"A wise old bird lived in an oak;
The more he saw the less he spoke;
The less he spoke the more he heard;
Why can't we all be like that bird?"

Some of our friends try to bring up their children to be seen but not heard. The less they say the better, for it is well known that the wise say much in a few words. And usually those who talk too much say little and betray their ignorance. Even among the birds this old adage is used to good advantage, but they sometimes turn it about.

We had been watching a little yellow-throat warbler that loves the swampy places and sings, "Witch-et-y! Witch-et-y! Witch-et-y!" And he is a witch with all the tricks. ~~We were honest in our advances to the yellow-throat, merely wanting to see his nest--and take a picture or two--but he met our friendliness with de-~~ ~~ceit.~~ We were anxious to visit his house when Mrs. Yellow-throat was at home, ~~but~~ every time he led us off by a devious path to the furthest limits of the patch. ~~We tried to take him unawares,~~ but he seemed to do nothing else but come out to meet visitors and pilot them ~~(in advance)~~ in the wrong direction. Whenever we got near the home, his wife herself slipped off the nest and appeared just before us calling, "Here-I-am! Follow! Follow!" She, too, led us away from the nest.

All this piqued us and we were determined to find it. ~~But finding the yellow-throats' nest is an intriguing and irritating job. Both of them had outwitted us long enough with their, "Witch-et-y! Witch-et-y! Here-we-are!" But they weren't there. They were here, there, and everywhere but where they said they were--the imps!~~ I had crouched in nearby bushes in a strained position all one afternoon till my legs and back ached, and my temper ached, too. At last I tried trickery. I took a long rope and with my companion to help, we crept up to the edge of the swamp late in the day and spread out quietly, each taking an end of the cord. At a signal we skirted

the opposite sides of the damp patch on a dead run, brushing the grass tops with the rope. Just as it swished across the lower end a yellow streak flashed in the air like a rocket, and as quickly disappeared. She was scared witless. She never dreamed of a snake sweeping the grass tops at such lightening speed. We walked over and after a little searching looked down on her nest and four eggs hung in the middle of a thick tussock.

The yellow-throats seem to hunt a place of coarse grass, stunted bushes, water, and sunshine to make their home, but the high grass is the main requirement. The nest may be sunk as low as eight inches above the ^{ground} ~~water~~, or it may be as high as two or three feet. This one was made entirely of the flattened leaves of sear ryegrass with a thin lining of horse hair. Loosely set or wedged down in the stiff stalks, it was not tied or fastened in any way to its supports.

Yellow-throat was certainly more of an ideal husband and father than most male birds. He kept watch about the home, worked side by side with his wife, and never failed when human prowlers disturbed their peace. In fact, he often marched squarely up in the face of the camera, when his mate had some doubt about facing the stare of the big round eye. By this time he had forgotten his witchety call. He approached his home spot with a harsher note of authority, "T'se-here! T'see-here!" Then he dropped to a more cautious, "Quit! Quit!" as he neared the nest, as if he was afraid of waking the babies.

The male yellow-throat always wears a plain mark of recognition on his face. He has a jet-black mask extending across his forehead and back on the sides of his head. Perhaps when Nature gave out the bird clothes, she bestowed this one on him so he could sing his falsehoods without a blush. His lady hops about without the sign of a veil and is dressed in subdued tints of yellow and brown. It is the Turkish custom reversed.

The yellow-throat is ^{found} ~~the type~~ of American warbler that loves the grass and low bushes of a marshy area from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It varies somewhat in size and color according to the region where it lives. Those scientists who have studied bird life have sub-divided the yellow-throats, naming one Maryland,

another Florida, and another Rio Grande. Two sub-species inhabit Oregon. The one you may hear east of the Cascades is named Western Yellow-throat. Near Portland and in the Willamette Valley is the Pacific Yellow-throat.

One day we sat in the shade watching two of the yellow-throat bantlings, and almost rolled over with laughter at their actions. Each youngster was afraid his brother would get the next morsel. And his fears were ~~quite~~ often realized. Two or three times they became so excited that they went at each other as if it was going to be a case of "the best man wins." ~~(There was dissension in this bird home and often there was just cause for disagreement.)~~

Both mother and father were putting their whole energy to satisfying the two little stomachs that seemed to go empty faster than they could be filled. The bairns were sitting side by side when the mother dropped to the perch and gave the nearer one a caterpillar. The father came two minutes later. If he tried to tell who had had the last bite, he was fooled. In a twinkling one of the chicks grabbed the bite he brought. "That belongs to me!" yelled the brother in righteous indignation. But it was too late: papa had gone. So he squatted down beside his squirming brother with a stoical expression that showed it was better to be a little too empty than a bit too full.

Both parents were nervous when their children were out in the unprotected open. They always tried to coax them down into the bushes before giving them food. We discovered a very urgent reason why these yellow-throats had to keep under cover. The camera was well concealed and aimed at a branch where the two young birds were perched. We were hidden a few feet away, ~~(waiting to click the camera.)~~ ^{Dark} There was a slight sound in the air, and looking up we saw a black object whizzing earthward like a falling star. As we jumped up, it swerved at the very point of striking, and swung upward with a swishing sound. It left us gazing at a sparrow hawk that sailed off down the hillside. Later we discovered that the yellow-throats had known all the time that this hunter had a nest in a fir tree half a mile down the canyon. But the young yellow-throats managed to grow up and outwit their enemies, and later in the season set out with their parents for the southland.

Mr Culloch
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C. C. Schmitt

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