



Sojourners

BY DANIEL M. ROPER

I hope you will forgive me for saying that I mingle with some pretty impressive company on occasion. One day in late April, for instance, I was received at several embassies, met with impeccably-dressed visitors from distant lands, and applauded the music and song of the world's finest symphonic and choral performers. My cordial hosts even had the good manners to refrain from commenting on my tennis shoes, shorts, and perspiration-stained shirt.

The first stop on my busy social calendar that April morning was the consular office of the representative from Brazil. After parking my pickup truck, I strolled to his chambers, where he greeted me with a jovial run-on sentence: "Cheerio...How ya' doin'?...Hello...I'm fine..."

He didn't pause for my reply, so I just stood there and gawked. The trouble was that I didn't know exactly where he was. Even though he was arrayed in his finest tan-and-white formal-wear and sported a bold eye-stripe, I couldn't quite pinpoint his location. It was vaguely annoying, but he's pretty small, given to darting about, and frequently ducks behind cover while searching methodically for his next succulent insect meal.

By now, you have deduced that I am referring to a bird (the photographs on this page were a giveaway, I suppose). In keeping with this theme, the "pretty impressive company" in whose presence I cheerfully spent the day were neotropical species just arrived from their winter ranges on Caribbean islands and in Central and South America. The "embassies" I visited were their preferred habitats. And the symphonies and vocalizations were, of course, their vibrant courtship and territorial songs.

In late April each year, I try to reserve a day for a pilgrimage to Chestnut Lead Trail in Cohutta Wilderness Area in north Georgia's Fannin and Gilmer Counties. I've found this a prime location from which to enjoy an ornithological show unequalled (except on hundreds of other trails in the southern mountains). I have to time it right. If I'm impatient and arrive a few days too early, flora and fauna are still shaking off the winter doldrums. Wait too long and thick foliage makes bird watching difficult. But pick a cloudless, coolish morning in late April and there will be a display superior to anything that mankind can orchestrate.



Red-eyed vireo
By Stan Chapman

I traditionally begin my pilgrimages at the Tearbitches Trail parking lot on Forest Service Road 68, about midway between Chatsworth and Ellijay. First, I walk down the gravel road about 1.5 miles to the Chestnut Lead trailhead. This road-walk takes me through a high-altitude deciduous forest of cherry, red oak, hickory and birch, a habitat frequented by the red-eyed vireo.

This loquacious "representative from Brazil" sustains its "cheerio...how ya' doin'?..." monologue with up to 40 to 60 individual phrases per minute. On one occasion in the 1950s, a birder with nothing better to do tallied more than 22,000 songs from one red-eyed vireo in a single day. That's loquaciousness!

This five-inch-long talker is unique among the neotropical birds, a classification used to denote species that overwinter in Central and South America and then migrate each spring to breed in North America. There are perhaps 150 neotropicals that follow this pattern, including most of the warblers, vireos, tanagers, and thrushes. Of these, only the red-eyed vireo breeds on both continents—North and South America.

This is so unusual that scientists are trying to determine if the population that migrates south from its winter range in northern and eastern South America to breeding grounds in Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina is actually a different species. I wouldn't be surprised, for it's hard to believe the same species that chooses to nest in the temperate forest near the 4,000-foot summit



Hooded warbler
By Bob Zaremba

of Georgia's Bald Mountain also breeds in the Pampas, the fertile lowlands of Argentina.

But that doesn't concern me on this perfect spring morning. I am content knowing that these birds have just arrived after a journey of perhaps 4,000 miles and are therefore quite voracious. They move along branches high overhead, seeking insects and caterpillars, which they take in their beak and thrash against a branch to stun or kill.

Forty minutes into my hike, I arrive at the Chestnut Lead trailhead, my next checkpoint. At just 1.8 miles in length, Chestnut Lead is a short trail, but it has three major habitat zones, each with its own avian residents. The first zone is the upper elevation section of trail, which descends gently or moderately from 3,300 feet to 2,800 feet along the narrow crest of the namesake ridge. This section of trail passes through a mostly-hardwood forest with a floor decorated by trilliums, lady-slippers, and other succulent annuals.

From previous pilgrimages, I know that this section of



Black-and-white warbler
By Rachel Cass

Chestnut Lead is the favored habitat of three warblers and two tanagers, and it doesn't take long for the first to irresistibly demand my attention. From a thicket to my right comes the unforgettably sweet song of the hooded warbler: wheetie-wheetie-wheetie-O!

I contend that no education is complete until a student has heard the song of the hooded warbler. From late April through May, Georgia trails should be jammed with students studying natural history in a way that is no longer taught or learned, in school or at home. Upon hearing the hooded warbler's melody, a certain percentage of these students would be stricken to their cores. For the rest of their lives, they would remember where they were when they first heard this lovely whistled woodland refrain. Students thus affected would be those destined to become society's idealists, naturalists, and poets, and we need our fair share of those.



Ovenbird
By David McNicholas

The hooded warbler is vividly outfitted in a mask of brightest yellow and darkest black, but I seldom see this skulker of thickets. It is busy gleaning insects from newly-emerged foliage and building a nest in the brush. While I pause to listen, I recall that this species has a fairly small winter range in the Caribbean and Central America. The one I am enjoying at the moment may have winged to Chestnut Lead from Hispaniola, Cuba or the Yucatan Peninsula.

While soaking this in, I hear the softer, more demure song of a black-and-white warbler—"weesie, weesie, weesie"—calling nearby. This arrestingly-patterned species forages along tree trunks and branches for spiders, caterpillars and adult insects, almost as if it was a relative of the nuthatch. One of the few warblers to winter in southern North America, its winter range also includes the Baja peninsula and northwestern South America. So the one calling may have spent the winter in Ecuador, Peru, or Colombia.

There's nothing demure about the song of the third warbler commonly found on the upper end of Chestnut Lead Trail. From the ridge-side sloping downward on my left comes the resounding "teacher, teacher, Teacher, TEACHER!" of the ovenbird. This mostly-brown bird builds its nest, complete with side entrance, on the ground. Don't bother looking for it, though, as the little magician has it well concealed. The ovenbird's winter range includes the Florida peninsula, the Caribbean islands, and Central America from the heart of Mexico to Panama. While this means a shorter journey to its summer breeding grounds than for many other warblers, it is estimated that up to one-half of ovenbirds perish during migration due to exertion, weather, and other causes.

To this point, I have yet to catch sight of any of the warblers I've enjoyed listening to, but there's no problem finding two brightly-colored birds singing in the treetops overhead. The summer tanager and the dashing scarlet tanager may have wintered in lands as distant as Bolivia. Both have songs similar to but sweeter than the familiar caroling of the American robin, though the scarlet tanager's voice is slightly raspy, as though it had a sore throat. The scarlet tanager eats insects,



Scarlet tanager
By Bob Zaremba



Summer tanager
By Bob Zaremba



Black-throated-green warbler
By Vicki DeLoach

spiders, earthworms, buds, and small fruits, but the summer tanager is more picky. Its menu consists of bees and wasps, which it captures and beats against a limb to remove the stinger.

About three-quarters-of-a-mile down Chestnut Lead, the trail turns left and drops abruptly into a steep-walled, moist cove. The strenuous quarter-mile descent passes through habitat favored by two more warblers—the black-throated-green and the worm-eating. I’ve already been catching snippets of the black-throated-green’s ringing “ze-ze-ze-zo-zee!” song for awhile, so it’s no surprise when one breaks into full voice on the slope to my left. This lover of moist mountainsides and gaps looks for insects on the underside of leaves. He may have overwintered in Jamaica or perhaps the tropical rainforests of Nicaragua or Honduras.

While the ground-dwelling ovenbird prefers gentle to moderate slopes, the worm-eating warbler fancies the steepest mountainsides. It nests on the ground, where it forages for caterpillars in dense undergrowth, calling with an insect-like cadence that reminds me of the whirring of an electric sewing machine. The little lurker in the underbrush to my right may have been warming its wings in Costa Rica or El Salvador just a few weeks ago.

The final stretch of Chestnut Lead Trail follows (and thrice crosses) Chestnut Creek for nearly a mile to its confluence with the Conasauga River.



Worm-eating warbler
By Rachel Cass



Black-throated blue warbler
By Dave McNicholas

Running full and fast after a series of spring thunderstorms, Chestnut Creek splashes and gurgles noisily on its rocky run, drowning out all but the loudest bird song. Nevertheless, there are two warblers capable of overcoming the background noise: the black-throated-blue warbler and the Louisiana waterthrush.

While satisfied to just listen to many of the species I've encountered thus far, the black-throated-blue warbler makes observation easy and definitely worthwhile. I hear him before I see him, singing "zo-zo-zree!" in lush rhododendron and maple that borders the creek. I pause for a moment, cock my ear, and soon spy this debonair singer outfitted in snowy-white, jet-black, and cobalt-blue iridescently gleaming in the bright morning sunlight. This one may have wintered in the Caribbean or southern Central America.

As I near the end of Chestnut Lead Trail, a ringing song beginning with three loudly whistled notes followed by a descending chatter catches my ear. These melodious sounds signal the presence of the Louisiana waterthrush, a warbler fond of gravel-bottomed streams in deciduous forests in hilly or mountainous terrain. Its diet, well adapted to its environment, includes insects, arthropods, earthworms, and occasionally small fish and frogs. Of the species I've noted thus far, this is usually the first to arrive in the Georgia mountains each spring, perhaps having arrived from northern Columbia or western Venezuela.

When I reach the shallow, sparkling water of the Conasauga River, I'm at the end of Chestnut Lead Trail. Now I have a decision to make. I can return to my vehicle the way I came, which would involve a 3.3-mile hike including the strenuous ascent through the hardwood cove. Or I can instead opt for a longer and markedly tougher route that requires 18 fordings of the Conasauga River and a 2,100-foot ascent of Bald Mountain via Tearbitches Trail.

I choose the latter, which means I still have a full day of hiking ahead. Along the way, I listen and watch for other neotropicals that frequent this area, including yellow-throated warbler, wood thrush, Acadian flycatcher, and great-crested flycatcher. But I'm a bit too early in the season to catch one of my favorites, the chestnut-sided warbler, whose cheerful song is matched by its striking colors.

By late May, the chestnut-sided warbler will populate the stunted chestnut oak forest atop Bald Mountain. This winter-time resident of moist tropical forests in Panama, Columbia, and Venezuela is the last of the neotropical breeders to arrive, awaiting leaf-out at the highest elevations, where it will glean insects and other arthropods from the bottom of leaves.

I'm not disappointed by my failure to find any chestnut-sided warblers during this visit. It just gives me an excuse to return next month, when I can once again mingle with foreign dignitaries attired in distinctive clothing, who converse in a remarkable variety of exotic tongues. Perhaps that, too, will be an experience worth writing about. ▀

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