

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
May 18, 2008

Catch the Wave

By Mark Baldwin

For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



More often heard than seen, with its ringing "teach-er, TEACH-er, TEACH-er!" song, the Ovenbird is one of dozens of neotropical songbird species that inhabit the woods of the Chautauqua Watershed to breed in spring and summer. (Photo by Timothy Baird.)

On Friday, May 2, I sat at my office desk organizing my work for the day when I saw a quick movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked out the window fast enough to see a tiny, black-and-orange bird flash by to perch for a moment on the branch of an aspen before flying out of sight. A male American redstart! Startled by the beauty of it, another bird popped into view – a chestnut-sided warbler, then another – a yellow warbler.

I took the hint, grabbed binoculars and headed outside. I walked a short loop through the woods at the edge of town and got a great, long look at a male magnolia warbler before heading back to the corner of the building where I had seen the action

before. I should not have left, because I found myself in the middle of a migration wave. It got hard to keep up with what I was seeing and hearing all around me. More yellow and chestnut-sided warblers, least flycatcher, black-and-white warbler, Blackburnian warbler, Nashville warbler, lots of yellow-rumped warblers, blue-winged warbler, red-breasted nuthatch, Carolina wren. A northern flicker flashed its white rump as it winged away through the woods. A wood thrush offered its dreamy flute-like song from deeper in the woods. A great blue heron flew directly overhead, carrying nesting material in its dagger-like bill. White-crowned sparrows appeared to be everywhere. The soft melodic song of a Baltimore oriole issued from somewhere near the parking lot as a female oriole took bites from the suet feeder. I heard the cheery notes of a rose-breasted grosbeak, which Peterson described as resembling the robin's song, "but given with more feeling, as if a robin has taken voice lessons." This was all within an hour. I did manage to get my work done that day but I admit I felt distracted.

Most of the birds piling into our woodlot that day had probably arrived during the pre-dawn hours, exhausted and needing to refuel from a nightlong flight from who knows where? The weather was mild and humid, rain threatening. A cold front was moving in; the birds were bunched up in the warmer air ahead of it. What I witnessed was a tiny glimpse of the spring migration of perhaps five billion songbirds that arrive in North America to breed. They come from Caribbean islands, southern Mexico, Central America, even South America as far south as Peru. These are not "our" birds that "fly south for the winter," they are creatures of the tropics that, against all odds and at great

risk, fly thousands of miles north only to breed. Many of them will return to their tropical homeland by mid-summer.

Some of these birds will nest in a woodland or overgrown field near you, right here in the Chautauqua Watershed. Won't you take the time to get outdoors and get to know them, our guests from the tropics?

The public is invited to join Rebecca L. Nystrom, Professor of Biology, Jamestown Community College, on the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy's Spring Wildflower Tour at Dobbins' Woods this Sunday, May 18th at 1:00 PM. The site is located on Bly Hill Road about one mile west of Route 394 in North Harmony. For tour information call 397-1990. The CWC has led efforts to conserve 600 acres of shore lands, wetland, forests and fields across Chautauqua County. To learn more about the CWC's programs or opportunities for assisting this not-for-profit organization, please call 664-2166.