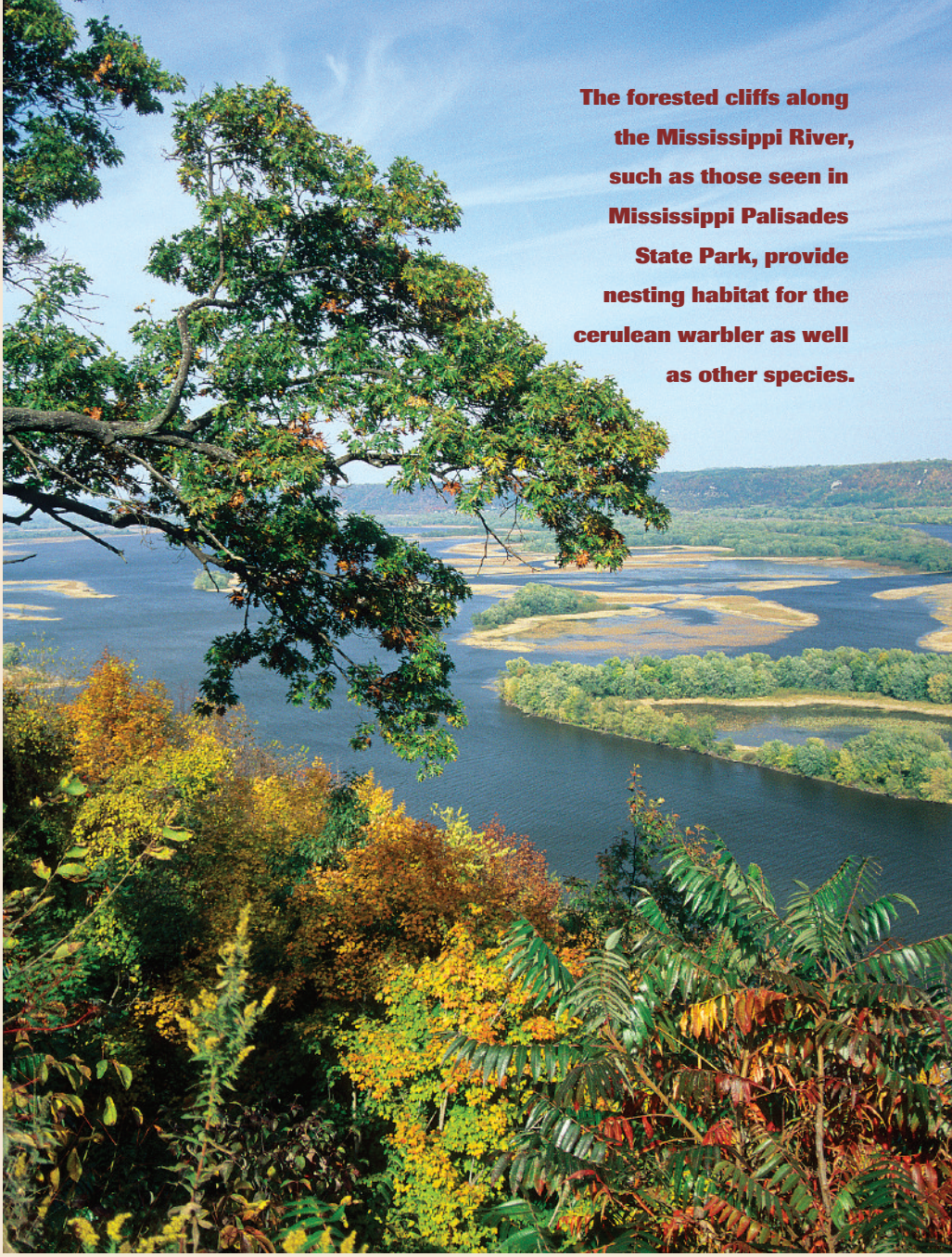
Warblers might travel thousands of miles to build a nest. Illinois birders don't have to travel far to spot these winged warriors.

The Warbler Way

Story and Photos By Laurie Smaglick Johnson



The forested cliffs along the Mississippi River, such as those seen in Mississippi Palisades State Park, provide nesting habitat for the cerulean warbler as well as other species.

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.

Nesting in cavities poses unique problems for the prothonotary warbler as the necessary habitat disappears in our developing world.

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-

The cerulean warbler is listed as state-threatened, but has a stronghold in Illinois compared to other places.

bler watching particularly enjoyable.

The cerulean warbler is one of the most sought-after of these tiny creatures. Their affinity for foraging in the highest of treetops makes them difficult to find and observe, but listening for their high-pitched, distinctive call is a reliable way to pinpoint their location. Their incredibly vibrant cerulean blue color is impossible to describe in words and must be seen to be believed.

As with many popular migratory songbirds, the cerulean's future is in doubt due to habitat loss. The species requires large tracts of contiguous and mature forest to thrive, but are relegated to a few remaining fragments like that found at Mississippi Palisades State Park in Carroll County. A favorite place for many birders, at least 10 species of warblers nest in the park, with many other species seen there during migration—the peak time being the first three weeks of May.

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

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

defending his long and narrow streamside 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.

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.

part of the observer. Persistence, tolerance for insects, snakes, heat and tough slogging (and a good dash of luck), all play a part in increasing one's chances of getting a good look at him. The magnificent swamps and cane thickets of the southeastern United States provide the preferred habitat for this bird; however, a few Swainson's warblers reach the moist bottomlands of southern Illinois.

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.

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.

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.

For a sampling of state and national parks, and Illinois natural areas, where warblers may be seen, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Education/birding_in_Illinois/index.htm.