

ABOUT THE COVER: OVENBIRD

The haunting springtime *teacher-teacher-teacher* emanating from moist woodlands is a familiar sound to every birdwatcher. The Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) gets its common name from its dome-shaped nest, built on the ground, which bears a superficial resemblance to an old-fashioned Dutch oven. Its genus name, *Seiurus*, is Greek for "shaking tail"; this better describes the behavior of the Ovenbird's congeners, the waterthrushes, although Ovenbirds also sometimes bob their tails. Its species name, *aurocapillus*, means "golden-haired" and refers to the distinctive orange crown-stripe that is responsible for several folknames for this delightful warbler: "golden-crowned wagtail" and "golden-crowned thrush." The Ovenbird is a large, ground-dwelling warbler, olive above and white below; the underparts are heavily spotted and streaked with black. Smaller size, an orange or rufous crown stripe edged with black, and a white eye-ring serve to distinguish this species from the thrushes, and the lack of an eye-stripe distinguishes the Ovenbird from the waterthrushes. Ovenbird sexes are similar in plumage, but immature birds duller colored.

Three subspecies are generally recognized: *S. a. cinereus* (a grayish subspecies of the West), *S. a. furvior* (a darker subspecies from Newfoundland), and *S. a. aurocapillus* (in the northern and eastern parts of the species' range).

The Ovenbird's breeding range covers much of northeastern and northern North America, from eastern British Columbia to Newfoundland and south to northern Georgia and eastern Oklahoma. Ovenbirds are nocturnal migrants; the sexes migrate separately, the males arriving on the breeding grounds earlier than females. The population east of the Appalachians migrates mostly along the Mississippi flyway to winter in Mexico and Central America. Ovenbirds east of the Appalachians migrate along the Atlantic flyway and winter in Florida and the Caribbean. In Massachusetts, Ovenbirds are common breeding birds, arriving during the last week of April or in early May. They begin to depart in July and are less numerous in the fall migration than in the spring. A few birds have been reported during the winter.

Ovenbirds are seasonally monogamous and usually produce a single brood. They sometimes mate with the same partners in successive years. Their breeding habitat is mature or secondary deciduous or mixed coniferous-deciduous woodlands and forests. Males are highly territorial and defend their territories by aggressive displays and song, sometimes counter-singing (singing during or immediately after another bird's song) with males in adjacent territories. Both sexes vocalize on the wintering grounds, but only the males are vocal on the breeding territory. The *teacher-teacher* song, often repeated a dozen times with increasing amplitude, serves both to attract mates and advertise and defend the male's territory. The displays include an aerial display characterized by hovering, labored, flight with tail and wings spread, during which an "attenuated" flight song is uttered. Thirteen calls have been identified, including

a variety of *sip*, *chep*, *chirp*, and *chitter* notes. Chases and other aggressive (agonistic) interactions occur between males at territorial boundaries.

Choosing the nest site and building the domed nest of grass, leaves, and stems, often lined with deer hair, are strictly the domain of the female. The usual clutch is four white eggs, spotted and speckled with browns of varying hues. The female alone incubates, but during incubation the male may feed the female. She may give a distraction, or injury-feigning, display if the nest is approached by a potential predator. After about 12-14 days, the eggs hatch. Eight to ten days later, the parents divide the brood, with the male remaining on territory. Both parents feed the young at the nest. Ovenbirds walk rather than hop and glean insects and larvae from the forest floor, although they will sometimes forage in shrubs and may probe, hover, and hawk for invertebrates.

As ground-nesting birds, Ovenbirds are preyed upon by snakes, squirrels, skunks, raccoons, and weasels, and adults are taken by a variety of hawks and owls. Ovenbirds require large tracts of continuous forest or woodlands for successful breeding and have suffered badly from forest fragmentation. The fragmentation of a forest produces an increasing percentage of forest edge habitat. An "edge effect" results, in which predators that specialize in forest edge (Blue Jays, for example), and nest parasites such as the Brown-headed Cowbird, have increasingly devastating effects. These threats are largely absent from forest interiors. The hazards of migration, including collisions with human-made structures such as radio towers and buildings, are compounded by habitat destruction of the Ovenbird's wintering ground in the Caribbean and in South and Central America. Reforestation in the Northeast may explain Breeding Bird Survey indications that Ovenbird populations increased in the eastern United States, and particularly in eastern Canada, from 1965-1978. However, more recent data indicate overall declines in numbers, probably resulting from forest fragmentation. We certainly hope that conservation and proper management of large forest tracts will continue to make the sound of *teacher-teacher* a hallmark of spring.

— William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

The insightful bird drawings of Barry Van Dusen, an artist and illustrator based in Princeton, Massachusetts, frequently appear on the cover of *Bird Observer*. Barry will be a featured artist at the Midwest Birding Symposium in Lakeside, Ohio, September 16-19. At Wisconsin Birds in Art, a juried show beginning September 11 in Wassau, Wisconsin, Barry will be showing an oil painting of Wood Ducks illuminated by evening light at Milford, Massachusetts — the first time Barry has placed a work in this medium in this prestigious show. Birders and aspiring bird artists will have an opportunity to learn directly from Barry when he participates in a "Nature Journaling" workshop to be given at Massachusetts Audubon's Wachusett Meadow Sanctuary on October 2; call the Sanctuary at (978) 464-2712 for more information.