

*Hikers have ample opportunities to enjoy and protect the many bird species that can be spotted along the trail.*



# WATCHING for WARBLERS

By Jeffrey Hunter

**O**N A HIKE in the Appalachians, the rhythm of your footfalls might suddenly be interrupted by the buzz-like notes of a songbird. Glancing up, you might spot a sky-blue creature darting amid the trees, its breast and flanks streaked with black, its wings striped white. Locating the bird in your field guide, you would discover it is a cerulean warbler, an increasingly rare sight in the southeastern United States—and the highlight of your trip.

Hiking and bird-watching are naturally compatible activities. Of all the varieties of wildlife that you're likely to encounter along the trail, birds are by far the most abundant. Most hikers can recall a memorable bird-watching moment. I still remember my first

sighting of a golden eagle soaring above the ridge along the Appalachian Trail in New York. More commonly, our feathered friends provide the soundtrack to our hiking experiences. Maybe you have been startled by the call of an unfamiliar bird, enchanted by the ethereal song of a Swainson's

thrush on a foggy summer morning, or kept awake in your tent at night by a chuck-will's-widow singing its repetitive song.

Trails are often the only way to reach important bird areas. Many well-maintained trails allow hikers to focus their attention on looking for birds instead of just on the path ahead. They provide safe access to mountain peaks, bogs, wetlands, and other habitats where birds can be viewed. However, although hikers have ample opportunities to enjoy birds, many species, such as the cerulean warbler, are facing increasing threats.

## Better Bird Watching

With more than 650 bird species native to North America, hikers have no shortage of birds to see and learn about. Like any hobby, bird watching usually requires



**By being patient and observant, hikers might spot the cerulean warbler, an increasingly rare sight in the southeastern United States.**

some practice and determination before you'll reap rewards.

Timing is an important factor that influences your likelihood of seeing birds. Bird populations migrate seasonally, so your best opportunity to see a wide variety of birds is during the spring and fall migrations and the breeding months in between. Because most of our songbirds migrate at night, early spring mornings are perhaps the best time to spot them. In the early morning hours, especially that first hour after sunrise, these birds seek both food and shelter, awaiting the night to resume their migration. Winter can also be very productive. When deciduous forests drop their leaves, spotting woodpeckers and other forest-dwelling birds is much easier.

Another factor that will influence your success in spotting birds is location. Edge habitat is a particularly good place to spot birds. An edge is an abrupt change in the landscape. For example, a trail that follows a forest where it borders a field or wetland



**The chuck-will's-widow is known to many hikers by its repetitive song.**

would be an excellent location to look for birds. A rock ledge that overlooks a forest below would be another prime location for spotting both perching birds, such as warblers and sparrows, and soaring birds such as hawks and vultures. Manmade edges formed by power lines, ball fields, and municipal parks often provide excellent places to both hike and bird watch.

Having patience and moving slowly and quietly will also help you to spot many birds. Loud noises and sudden movements can startle wildlife. Taking a break from your hike to sit quietly on a log or rock can prove revealing. Train your

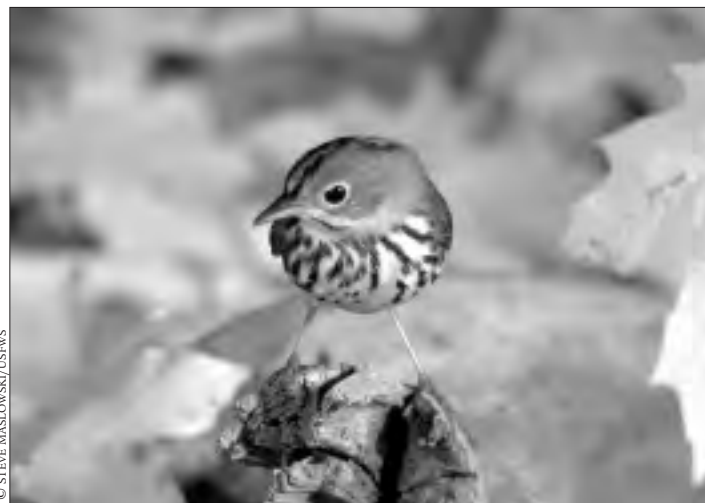
eyes to watch for movement. Many birds are difficult to spot, and the slightest movement may betray their presence. The rustling of a small bush or clump of vines might reveal the location of a shy and reclusive species such as a yellow-billed cuckoo. A flash of brilliant red high in the canopy might reveal the common but seldom seen scarlet tanager.

Birding is as much an auditory experience as it is visual. More often than not, you'll hear birds

before you see them. Singing is done by males during the breeding season, so the best times to listen for birds are during the spring and summer months. Memorizing the songs of common birds is easier than you might think. If you associate a bird song with a phrase or expression, it can often help you in the field. For example, the white-throated sparrow's song sounds something like "Old Sam Peabody Peabody Peabody." The barred owl's hoot sounds like "who cooks for you...who cooks for you all." The ovenbird's song aptly sounds like "pizza, pizza, pizza"—or maybe "teacher, teacher, teacher." Feel free to make up your own phrasing if it helps you to remember a bird song.



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**Bird songs often sound like phrases. The barred owl (left) hoots like "who cooks for you...," while the ovenbird (above) calls out "teacher teacher teacher."**

## Tricks of the Trade

If you are new to bird watching, two pieces of equipment will prove invaluable. The first is a good field guide. For several reasons, guidebooks containing illustrations are preferable to those with only photographs. “Photographs capture a single bird in an instant in its life,” explains renowned bird illustrator David Sibley. “A photo is influenced by lighting, film, and the shape of that individual bird. An illustration allows me to convey a simple representation of a bird species and clearly show the common features of each species. I can control the shading and eliminate the distracting background that appears in many photographs.” Excellent resources for both the fledgling and seasoned bird watcher include *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* and *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*, as well as the Peterson Field Guides.

Another indispensable piece of equipment is optics. The key to identifying bird species in the field is the ability to distinguish marks on individual birds. For this reason, you should purchase the best pair of binoculars you can afford. “Weight is obviously a very important consideration for hikers, but super-lightweight binoculars are never as good as a heavier pair,” Sibley advises. “It’s always going to be a trade-off, but I would encourage folks to carry a little bit more weight with a pair of binoculars. It’s going to make a difference in the quality of your birding experience.” Sibley recommends trying out several different pairs before making a purchase.

Of course, as with any pursuit, there is no substitute for experience. Going into the field with an experienced bird watcher can provide tips on how and where to locate birds in your area. Since many birders are also hikers, you should have no trouble find-



**Good binoculars offer a better view of high-canopy birds such as the bald eagle.**

ing someone to share their knowledge and enthusiasm at a local birding club. Consider asking your local bird-watching club to lead an outing for your hiking club.

## Threats to Bird Populations

Although several populations of bird species are doing quite well, a variety of factors, including habitat loss, pollution, and wind farms, has led to the decline of many bird species. As the human population grows, new housing developments are continually encroaching on the fields, forests, and wetlands that birds require for foraging and reproduction. More than half of our nation’s wetlands have already been destroyed, and many more are threatened with destruction.

Some bird species are suffering throughout their range. The tiny cerulean warbler, for example, spends most of the year in the tropical forests of South and Central America. Each spring, cerulean warblers return to the Appalachian and

Cumberland Mountains to reproduce, which requires a very particular habitat—large tracts of mature deciduous forest. The largest known populations of cerulean warblers can be found along the Cumberland Plateau in northeast Tennessee, southeast Kentucky, and southwest Virginia.

Unfortunately, this area also contains some of the country’s largest proven coal reserves. Traditionally, coal was extracted through underground mining that was less destructive to forest ecosystems than the mountaintop removal process that has gained prominence in recent years. Mountaintop removal involves the decapitation of mountains

to access the coal seam. Once the coal is removed, the mined areas are covered with soil and planted with grasses—and cerulean warbler habitat is lost forever. The bird’s winter habitat in the tropics is also under siege, making the situation all the more serious.

Pollutants in our air, water, and soil also threaten bird and wildlife populations globally. Many industrial chemicals persist in the environment for generations. When these chemicals enter the food chain, they can build up



**The coal-mining process known as mountaintop removal is destroying large tracts of critical habitat for cerulean warblers and other birds.**

in the systems of predators such as bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and ospreys. The population of these three bird species was brought to the brink of extinction in the 1960s, but with the ban of DDT, these majestic birds once more grace our skies. In addition, many of our nation's most vital bird habitats lie near shipping lanes, which are vulnerable to oil spills. Recent oil spills along the Delaware River in Pennsylvania and near Alaska's Aleutian Islands demonstrate the impact that industrial accidents can have on fragile ecosystems.

Finally, the need to reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil has created a surge in applications for wind turbines. While generating new forms of renewable energy is important, wind turbines, if improperly sited, can exact a terrible toll on bird populations. Currently, the Appalachian Trail Conference and Maine Audubon Society are opposing a proposed wind farm within sight of the Appalachian Trail in Maine. (For more information, see "Trails Today" in this issue.)

### Next Steps

With every step along the trail, you have a chance to see or hear birds. Back home, you can also take important steps to promote the conservation of threatened bird species (see sidebar). Partnering with other hikers, bird enthusiasts, and conservationists is an effective way to protect bird habitat. In 2004, for example, the Orange County Land Trust and the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference worked cooperatively to protect five parcels of key habitat along the scenic Shawangunk (pronounced "shon-gum") Ridge, which will now become part of the Shawangunk Ridge Trail.

In addition to the obvious recreational benefits, this agreement will protect an important wildlife corridor for a wide variety of songbirds and raptors, as well as black bear, bobcat,



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**A hiker pauses at a national wildlife refuge to view waterfowl.**

## Looking Out for Birds

How can you help protect bird populations for future generations to enjoy? Here are a few suggestions.

- ❖ Learn about the conservation issues related to birds. To learn more about the many threats to our bird populations, visit the International Migratory Bird Day website: [www.birdday.org](http://www.birdday.org).
- ❖ Get involved with a local land trust to protect bird habitat. If your trail club is not already affiliated with a land trust, establish a partnership and work cooperatively on conservation issues. If a land trust doesn't already exist in your area, form one with some friends and neighbors. An excellent resource is *Conservancy: The Land Trust Movement in America* by Richard Brewer (reviewed in the Winter/Spring 2004 edition of *American Hiker*).
- ❖ Write letters to your local, state, and federal elected officials. Encourage them to support conservation initiatives that protect both trails and birds.
- ❖ Keep your cat indoors. Each year hundreds of millions of birds are killed by free-roaming cats.
- ❖ Transform your backyard into bird-friendly habitat. By limiting pesticide and herbicide use and planting native species, your backyard can be transformed into an oasis for birds.
- ❖ Share your enthusiasm for trails, birds, and the great outdoors with the next generation of hikers and conservationists.

and other wildlife. The area is also notable for its unusually large stand of American chestnut trees. This agreement was made possible, in part, by a bird-a-thon fundraiser that generated more than \$100,000 for conservation in the last two years for the Orange County Land Trust.

Just as bird-watching requires patience and determination, protecting birds requires creativity and dedica-

tion. Above all, have some fun with it! That's the whole idea.

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