

# Prothonotary Warbler

*Protonotaria citrea*

Once dubbed the “Golden Swamp Warbler” because of its partiality to flooded forests, the Prothonotary Warbler acquired its current name from 18th century Louisiana Creoles who thought the bird’s plumage resembled the golden robes of the protonotarius, a Catholic church official who advised the Pope.

Early ornithologists had classified the warbler in the same genus as the waterthrushes, and later categorized the species as the sole member of its own genus, *Protonotaria*. The species name, *citrea*, refers to the lemon color of the bird.

The prothonotary is unique among the eastern warblers because it nests in holes in trees. Abandoned Downy Woodpecker holes are the most common nest sites, but the warbler will nest in a variety of natural cavities in dead branches, the broken top of a stump, or a cypress knee.

As with most cavity nesters, the availability of suitable nesting cavities is the most critical habitat requirement for breeding prothonotaries.

Cavity nest-sites are not the only habitat feature required by the species.

Prothonotary Warblers are rarely ever found far from some body of water, whether it be a slow running river or creek, a large wooded lake, their favorite flooded bottomland forests, or a low spot in the forest that maintains temporary standing water.

This special attraction to water may be due to a higher number of decaying

trees with nest cavities in flooded areas and the added benefit of lower predation by mammals when the nest-site is located over water.

Prothonotaries have nested in Corkscrew in previous years (2001, 2006, 2007), but water levels and habitat must be ideal for that to happen.

Insect food for the growing nestlings is also abundant in flooded areas, especially when millions of mayflies emerge and provide the warbler and many other birds with an all-you-can-eat buffet.

A downside to nesting over water is that as poor-flying young fledge from a nest, they run the risk of landing in the water and becoming lunch for a turtle or a largemouth bass. Luckily, fledgling prothonotaries have a natural ability to swim and can quickly make it to nearby logs and land.

In contrast to their aggressive territoriality during the breeding season, wintering prothonotaries exhibit almost no aggression against each other as they forage in large groups for insects. Male and female prothonotaries apparently



sometimes maintain their pair-bond on the wintering grounds.

Because of the warbler’s very specific habitat requirements, threats to breeding and wintering populations take come from wetland losses to logging and development in both the bottomland forests of North America and the mangrove swamps of Central and South America.

The prothonotary has also played an important role in American history.

The sight of a prothonotary along the Potomac River once made a birdwatcher named Alger Hiss so excited that he told a friend about his experience.

Unfortunately, the fact that Whittaker Chambers knew about the prothonotary sighting was one of the links that a freshman congressman named Richard Nixon used to prove that the two men knew each other, leading to the conviction of Hiss on a perjury charge.

So a Prothonotary Warbler probably provided an assist for Nixon’s subsequent rise to the Presidency!

