



MONTEREY NEWS

June 2019

Est. 1970 Vol. XLVIII • Number 6



A Bird I Know: Chestnut-sided Warbler

The green is upon us, all through the swamps, fields, and woods. Every living thing has a way with the coming of the green, an adjustment, some kind of welcome. For the outdoorsy person in New England there will be shade, less open sky. We'll remember the long winter view into the woods, the shape of the ground and the ridges, not to mention the snowy woods floor brightening our short days with reflected sun and our long nights with moon and starlight shining up from the ground. Now we have a whole new world, and not just for us.

Birds are harder to see with all these leaves in the way, so we pay attention to how they sound. Most have a characteristic "call," also a "song." This time of year with the familiar wildflowers springing open we run for the field guides. There are the bookmarks from last year when we did the same thing. Bring in a familiar plant friend and give it a squint. "I know you, I just can't remember your name. And I said the same thing last year and looked it up and wrote it down and now I'm doing that again."

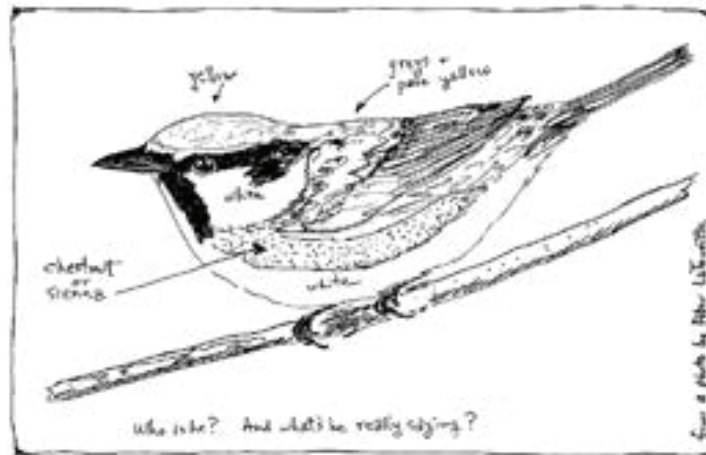
At least the flowers hold still on the plant, or in a glass of water, as we puzzle and sleuth. With birds, it's only like that if they have been killed by a car, or brought in by the cat. Mostly we get a glimpse, a moment of memory, and then they are gone. Lucky for us, we can often hear them even when they are out of sight.

Now comes the memory channel for things audible, and many a bird watcher has found mnemonic aids a big help. These have been thought up over the years, put into English words and phrases that sound a lot like the song of the bird. The message? Not so much.

When we hear a Barred Owl and think to ourselves almost automatically, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" we might get a mental image of someone in a kitchen cooking. We are likely to grin at

the phrase we have stored away that helps us remember this owl. This helps us with identification but has nothing to do with the bird, of course. I always remember Donald Kroodsmå's writing, in his slim guide to backyard birdsong, that he hopes the book will help us not just to identify birds, but to identify with birds.

The feathered familiar that has returned to our homestead today is one I haven't seen yet this year, but I know his song, and in English it is filed away for me as "Pleased, pleased, pleased, pleased to meetcha!" In spite of myself, I attach this sentiment to the bird who has not knowing-



ly said it at all. I can't help smiling almost as if some English-speaking visitor had come walking up the path and said this to me.

Besides feeling appreciated by a little animal I haven't even spotted yet, I know what he looks like because I have seen him every year and I remember him. He is small, about five inches long, and has yellow on top of his head, a black eyestripe and mutton chops, and a remarkable "broad chestnut stripe which runs down sides and flanks." This is in the description by Edward Howe Forbush, 1858-1929, who was the State Ornithologist for Massachusetts. His account of the Chestnut-sided Warbler starts off practical and scientific, and then launches into the section called "Haunts and Habits." Here he gives his own observations as well as those sent to him by trusted observers in Massachusetts.

It is not, perhaps, so beautiful as some of the more retiring warblers, but as Professor

Lynds Jones says, it impresses one as an exquisite, and there is something about it which makes the "day brighter, the wearing field work easier, and the hours of fasting forgotten," when it flies into view. Perhaps its dainty, immaculate white vestiture, with its clean-cut chestnut stripes, so unique among the small birds, 21 together with its jauntiness and trimness, set it apart from and above all its fellows. Robert Ridgway rates it as "perhaps the prettiest of all our warblers." This is high rating from a distinguished source, *Birds of Massachusetts*, by Edward Howe Forbush, (Norwood Press 1929).

Forbush tells in some detail how a female built the nest. It took about six days to finish and was held together again and again with the webs made by tent caterpillars, which the bird gathered and brought to the fork of a bush, to hold dried grasses in place for the sides. The Chestnut-sided Warbler female lays three or four eggs and does all the incubating, with the male bringing food for her, mostly caterpillars and other insect larvae. The babies hatch after ten or eleven days and flutter out after another ten days or so. Both parents feed them.

By the end of September most of these "exquisites" will have left New England. The leaves will be turning, the woods opening up for the long views again. My daily life is of the season, and suddenly one day when the green comes spreading through the land, a bird I know will sing, "Pleased, pleased, pleased to meetcha!" and make me smile. — Bonner McAllester

Monterey News, June 2019