# Prothonotary Warbler

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

Often called the Golden Swamp Warbler, because of its preference for flooded forests, the brilliant orange yellow coloring of the Prothonotary Warbler makes it a feast for the birdwatcher's eye. This stunning bird's name heralds back to the 18th century when the Louisiana Creoles thought the bird's plumage resembled the golden robes of the protonotarius, a Catholic church official and scribe.

Unique among eastern warblers, this species is the sole member of its own genus, Protonotaria and is often found nesting in abandoned Downy Woodpecker holes or other natural cavities. Never found far from a body of water, e.g rivers, lakes, streams, or swamps, Prothonotary Warblers have also been sited nesting near backyard ponds and swimming pools.

Photo courtesy of Jerry Kumery

## Interesting Facts:

**Family:** Parulidae

**Scientific Name:** *Protonotaria citrea*

**Location:** The Prothonotary Warbler can be found throughout the eastern United States and southern Canada. Winters are spent in range from Mexico to Colombia and Venezuela. They prefer areas with standing water such as the swamps, ponds and wetland areas of North America and the mangrove swamps of Central and South America.

**Migration:** During winter Prothonotary Warblers will migrate to parts of Central and South America and the West Indies. Migration begins in late July to mid-August. Prothonotaries winter communally in mangrove and freshwater swamps where male and female pairs sometimes maintain their bond.

**Nesting:** Prothonotary Warblers are the only eastern wood warbler that makes their nests in cavities. Abandoned woodpecker holes, stumps, dead branches, or the "knee" of a cypress tree are all suitable nesting sites. Nests can be from 2 to 12 feet off the ground, but normally average about 5 feet. Nests are generally over or near water, which can be problematic during flood situations. Males make "dummy nests", but females alone build the nest to be used, filling the cavity with moss, lichen, dry leaves, small twigs and strips of bark. Nests are generally lined with fine grasses and sedges. Females can lay 3-8 eggs per clutch although the average is 4-6. She will then incubate them for 12-14 days. Egg coloring is a glossy white with a cream or yellowish tinge and reddish brown and purplish gray spots and



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blotches. The young are ready to fledge 11 days after hatching. Since the Prothonotary's nests are generally situated over water, these fledglings have the unique ability to swim as well as fly. Fledglings usually stay in the nest for about a week longer until they are no longer dependent on their adult parents.

**Diet:** These warblers are primarily insectivores, eating ants, mayflies, beetles, and the larvae of aquatic insects. They will also consume some crustaceans and snails. They are often found creeping along the surface of trees, stumps, and fallen logs searching for food. During winter months their diet may expand to include some fruits and nectar.

**Size and Color:** Prothonotaries average about 5-1/2" in length. The head, chest, and belly of the males are a golden orange yellow; with an olive colored back. Wings are blue-gray, and the tail is blue-gray with large white patches on the outer feathers. The females are generally duller with olive-colored upper parts and golden yellow under parts. The belly is pale yellow to white; wings and tail are the same as the males. Both male and female have long sharp black bills and large black eyes.

**Song:** Their melodious song is a loud series of notes, sounding like *sweet sweet sweet sweet*.

**Special Characteristics:**

- These eye-catching birds hold a special attraction to water - possibly due to the high number of decaying trees in flood areas and the higher density insect population.
- Males and females will also communicate with each other by expressing a soft chirp out of awareness and recognition. This occurs most often when they approach or leave the breeding cavity.
- Prothonotary warblers are territorial animals during the breeding season. During this time both the female and male can be aggressive to intruders, but neither is particularly territorial during the wintering season.

**Attracting:** One of the best ways to attract these amazingly beautiful and sweet tempered birds to your backyard is to offer them a suitable habitat for nesting. Living near water helps, but these birds can also be lured to larger garden pools. Creating a natural water garden, pool, pond, marsh or bog for your backyard will help entice Prothonotaries as well as other water and marsh loving birds to your area. Because they are cavity-loving birds, they have also been known to do well in nesting huts. Supplying



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simple fresh fruits like oranges, apples, and bananas can also aid in your quest to attract these somewhat elusive warblers.

Bird Pond Kit w/3-Tier Cascade

Fruit Feeders

Birdbaths

Birdhouses



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