Prairie Warbler

(*Setophaga discolor*)

Written by Jared Parks, Lower Shore Land Trust, Land Program Manager
Photo by Marcia Balestri, Worcester County, Maryland

You may be asking yourself, "Where are the posts about the pretty birds? Doesn't he like pretty birds?" The answer to the second question is complicated, but the answer to the first is, now... well, right after I touch on the second question, first. Who's on first???

Prairie Warbler (Setophaga discolor)
Photo by Marcia Balestri, Worcester County, Maryland

A student in a field class once asked the professor, "Did you get any good birds?" The professor replied, "They are all Good Birds, and, yes." Over my years as a birder, I have come to realize that professor was right. I do have my favorites (see previous post), but I like all birds. I've even grown to like chickens... All birds are Good Birds, but that professor, like so many other professors, was very particular with his words. He expected the same of his students. I think what he actually meant was, "You asked the wrong question, grasshopper. If what you meant to ask was whether I got any unusual birds, then the answer is yes." In much the same way, all birds are pretty birds. Some are just more brightly colored.

The prairie warbler is a common breeder here on the Lower Shore. It prefers scrubby areas and second growth forest and is often abundant in early succession loblolly pine plantations. They winter in Florida and throughout the Caribbean and arrive back in our area in early spring. These are not shy birds. As the picture shows, male prairie warblers find conspicuous perches from which to belt out their high-pitched buzzy, ascending song.

The males are unmistakable. They are green-backed with a bright yellow front, yellow under tail coverts, white tail spots, and black face markings with black streaks down their sides. Females are slightly muted versions of the males but are still fairly easy to identify. Youngsters in the fall, however, may hardly sport any black at all and can be difficult to identify without good looks.

Most people don't think of warblers as normal backyard birds since they rarely come to feeders (though pine warblers do have a taste for suet and some other species have been known to drink from hummingbird and oriole feeders). This makes sense since warblers are largely insect and berry eaters. However, if your yard has a diversity of native trees and shrubs and a clean water feature, warblers are not unusual. Prairies tend to be one of the more expected yard warblers and seem to like untended fall vegetable and pollinator gardens. Keep an eye open for them. They are so bright one is all you will need.

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