
Prothonotary Warbler

Protonotaria citrea (PROW)

Status: Uncommon transient and rare summer resident in eastern third to half of state; may be fairly common locally in proper habitat (particularly at MDCWA); rare transient elsewhere.

Habitat: Swampy woodlands, mature forest at water edge, and dense willow stands along rivers; occasional in residential areas. Inundation of wooded valleys around the edges of reservoirs has increased the available habitat for the species in scattered locations, for example, in the Flint Hills and Osage Plains.



Migration: The earliest arrivals are 8 April (Montgomery Co.) and 10 April (Linn Co.) but are usually about 25 April with most migration during the first half of May. West of the breeding range, first arrivals are late April (Finney Co.) to 21 May (Ellis Co.) with most during early May. The latest passage of spring migrants and earliest fall arrivals are clouded by the lingering presence of breeding birds. N. Goss states that most individuals leave the state in August; J. Linsdale reported migration in Doniphan County from 3 August-10 September; R. Johnston lists the median departure date as 22 August (6 August-10 September). Latest confirmed dates are 8-10 October (Sedgwick Co., P. Briggs), with an unconfirmed record on 10 November (Kearney Co.). One reported at Middle Springs (Morton Co.) on 5 July (K. Hart, S. Guy) must have been a vagrant.

Breeding: Typically nests in cavities of trees (old woodpecker holes or tops of broken stumps) standing in still or slow-flowing water. The cavity entrance ranges from 0.5 to 10.0 m above the ground or water surface, with a mean height of about 2 m. It may use nest boxes or other manmade structures: Goss reported two instances of a pair nesting in a sawmill (the second time, in a tin cup sitting on a beam near the roof); more recently, a pair used a wren house in Winfield (Cowley Co.), and in 1978 one nested unsuccessfully in an old bluebird box standing in flooded timber. Eggs have been reported 19 May-1 July (median, 12 clutches, 15 June); young in nest, 9 June-11 July; recently fledged young, 9 June-23 July.

Comments: This is one of the most striking wood-warblers, and the only eastern species that nests in cavities. It was named for its bright yellow plumage, which is similar in color to the traditional robes worn by papal clerks (prothonotaries) in the Roman Catholic Church. Petit recounts a fascinating role played by this species in recent U.S. history: the conviction of alleged spy Alger Hiss and Richard Nixon's rise to political power. Nixon, as a freshman congressman on the House Un-American Activities Committee, figured prominently in proving that Hiss had perjured himself in denying that he knew his accuser, ex-communist Whittaker Chambers. How? Chambers testified that Hiss, an amateur ornithologist, had told him excitedly about seeing a Prothonotary Warbler along the Potomac River – a fact that Hiss unwittingly corroborated during later testimony. A birder, it seems, can never deny a good sighting!

Banding: 18 banded; one encounter, in-state.

References: Busby and Zimmerman, 2001; Goss, 1891; Janzen, 2007; Johnston, 1965; Linsdale, 1928; Petit, 1999; Thompson and Ely, 1992.

