



FEEDER STATION

Ovenbird chooses indoor atrium for winter feeding station

by Christine Williamson

January 1995, I was fairly startled to find a message from Richard Biss on my answering machine. Usually—it's the other way around. I ramble on about birds I've seen that he might or might not want to put on the Chicago Audubon Society's Rare Bird Alert. Biss only calls me if I've made a big mistake—like reporting a Brewer's Sparrow when I meant to say Brewer's Blackbird.

Biss' message said there was an Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) in the atrium at a Hyatt Hotel in Chicago. Biss had had intermittent reports of a bird stalking around under the tables in the atrium since November 1994. I work downtown and was a logical choice to check out this wintering warbler. Biss asked if I would go on location to check out the bird for the CAS and for *Meadowlark*.

The only binoculars I could find in the bottom of a desk drawer were a badly out-of-whack pair of Tascos, but I thought I'd probably at least be able to spot the bird. How many birds could there be in the Hyatt at 150 E. Wacker?

The Hyatt is split into two sections. I entered the west tower lobby and poked around in all the indoor planters looking for a tiny warbler. It was when I was on my knees peering at planter level through a bed of hostas that the first hotel staffer approached me.

"Have you lost something?"

"Uhhh... no. Not exactly. I'm looking for a bird," I replied.

"We don't have any birds in here."

"Well, I know you usually don't. But this winter, you do. It's an Ovenbird, a neotropical migrant. It should be in Central America right now, but somehow, it got trapped in the atrium and is supposed to be in here, poking around some bar tables."

The man looked relieved. "Oh, this isn't the atrium. That's over the walk-

way there in the east tower. If there was a bird in here, in the west tower, I'd know about it. Wouldn't I?"

I quickly moved away before he called security to escort me out as yet another loony in off the street. There was indeed a big, glassed atrium ahead of me and yes, there was a bar area with a player piano and a fountain and a patio restaurant.

A quick glance at the spider plants and grasses planted under ficus trees confirmed that a bird had been here. A tiny bird, judging by the size of the spoor, but he seemed to be getting enough food by the number of white-wash spots. It took me a little while, but I found the Ovenbird firmly planted in a ficus right above the player piano. He was hunkered down in shade and looked rather oily, with spiky head feathers.

Geoff Williamson and I returned to the Hyatt atrium at the end of January, camera in hand, to record the spa like winter quarters of this warbler. It took much longer to locate the Ovenbird this time. The bird was well hidden, deep in a ficus tree and immobile. Our watching, even at a distance, was definitely noticed by the bird, who was disturbed enough after a few minutes to fly across the atrium to the patio restaurant. In flight and in the bright winter sunshine flooding this glasshouse, the Ovenbird appeared a little drab, but healthy.

We tried to unobtrusively photograph the bird in the open roofed patios restaurant from over the top of the planter screens surrounding it. Eventually, Geoff just entered the patio and began snapping the bird. Several waitresses stopped by to tell us about their "pet" bird. The restaurant manager apparently kept tabs on the bird's movements all day. A diner dropped a hunk of whole wheat roll on the floor for the bird.

I smiled at the idea of these naive

diners. This bird was an insectivore, not a pigeon. He wouldn't come to bread. I was sure he was staying alive by eating roaches, spiders, ants, and planter pest bugs. And maybe fruit flies. Within 30 seconds, however, the Ovenbird was attacking the chunk of bread half his size with vigor. The tiny bill couldn't crack the crust, but managed well on the soft insides of the bread.

Someone more official from the hotel eventually turned up and took down all my details. I realized halfway through the recitation of my purpose in trespassing in this atrium and in writing down my phone number, that the manager might use this information when he later filed charges against me. He didn't kick us out, but I wasn't so sure he wouldn't kill the bird in the interests of public health.

We considered coming back in April to attempt to release the bird outside for spring migration. I suggested that we could do it early in the morning so we could set up the mist nets before any hotel guests were up and about. I could see "Publicity Stunt" and "Ten-O-Clock News coverage" shining from his eyes. He didn't call security.

As of March 1995, the Ovenbird was still domiciled at the Hyatt. It had a fountain to bathe in and drink from and probably a lot of roaches to eat, if my office a few blocks away is anything to judge from. It had friendly hotel staff and guests to feed him. And it had me secreting hunks of suet block and mealworms inside the planters.

When I went to relocate the Ovenbird in late spring however it was nowhere to be found. I prefer to think it quietly died amid the flowerbeds or that it escaped through a window and found its way to more suitable habitat.

Williamson,
4016 Clarendon,
Chicago, IL 60613