



A Cup of Prothonotary Warblers

by Karen A. Forcum

I never passed the well without stopping to pump myself a cold clear cup of water. Nothing quenched my thirst or cooled me off like a swig of well water from the tin cup that hung there next to the old homestead in rural Mode, Illinois where I grew up and raised my own family. After the arrival of running water, Dad left the pump, and we much preferred this drink to the one from inside. When Dad and Mom moved from the home place into a new all modern home nearby, he hung the tin cup on a peg just inside the machine shed door.

June of 1994, Dad called me to come down and see what bird was building a nest inside the old tin cup. I stepped inside the gloom of the shed and crouched down with Dad to wait. Suddenly, a bright yellow ball whizzed in and burst forth with a series of loud ringing zweet, zweet, zweet notes. Soon his mate flew in with her beak stuffed with what we presumed were leaves. She flew straight to the tin cup and popped in. We heard little scratching sounds. Moments later, the female flew out. The male then flew in, landed on the cup, peeked in, and then left behind her.

For several years we had a Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) build in a bluebird house under the fuel tank, and successfully raise young. The summer of 1994, they had arrived in early May and a couple weeks later started building there and in another house hanging from the clothesline. We often saw them flitting about inside

Male Prothonotary Warbler peeking in tin cup with young inside. Mode, Illinois, Shelby County, 20 June 1994. Photo by Karen A. Forcum.

the machine shed hunting for insects.

We knew that they build dummy nests. The male will often start several nests, and the female will pick her choice of spots. The pair will then complete the nest. We thought the tin cup would surely be a dummy spot. This was not to be.

The Prothonotary Warbler is five-and-one-quarter to five-and-one-half inches long. The male sports a deep golden yellow head, neck, breast, and belly. Its back is more olive, with blue-gray wings and tail. The undertail coverts are white. The short white-patched tail, long bill, and prominent dark beady eyes, along with the brilliant yellow make this a striking looking bird.

This warbler was named from the Latin word, *Protonotarius*, meaning lemon color. A papal notary of the Roman Catholic Church who wore a yellow hood was named *Protonotarius*.

Prothonotary Warblers are found in the eastern United States as far north as Canada, and south to Florida and as far west as Nebraska and Kansas. The species winters from southern Mexico to northern South America. Most sources say you can find this warbler in damp habitats such as streams and swamps.

This warbler usually builds low, 5 to 10 feet above the ground, in hollow limbs, or even in nest boxes placed over or near the water. No source we found talks about nests in machine sheds or tin cups hanging 6 feet up on a nail.

Prothonotary Warblers usually build a loosely constructed bulky nest of leaves and mosses lined with grasses and feathers. Our nest contained this material, but it did not have much form by the time the birds fledged. The birds started incubating eggs on June 6. They usually lay six creamy white, purple-spotted eggs. We did not take down the cup to check the number.

The parents took turns incubating. When the male was away from the nest he sang persistently outside the shed from morning until night. He always gave a soft warble when he flew to the cup and peeked inside before trading places with the female. We sometimes saw him feeding her as she incubated eggs.

Hatching day came sometime around June 19 when we heard faint peeps from the cup. First male, then female peeked inside. The first few days they took turns staying with the hatchlings.

The parents fed at intervals of 10 to 20 minutes. We could see insect parts sticking out of their bills. They flew to the edge of the cup, warbled softly, peered in, then entered. They usually emerged carrying a fecal sac.

Four young fledged on June 30. We heard the parents call softly outside in the bushes.

The next day we knew all was not well. The male kept flying back into the shed and we heard a peeping bird calling from inside the shed wall. Dad finally deducted that one young Prothonotary Warbler had fallen inside the double tin wall. He waited another day hoping it would come out on its own. Finally, fearing it would perish, Dad took tin snips and cut a hole. The parent scolded from the recesses of the shed. Dad waited and soon a yellowish ball of fluff hopped out and fluttered down. Dad carried the bird outside and set it on a wood pile. Dad then retreated and watched the parent feed the young. The baby bird soon flew off to join its siblings calling in the bushes.

We experienced much awe as we watched the warblers build, incubate, feed, and fledge. Truly, our cup runneth over with joy!

*Forcum, Box 247
Mode, IL 62444

Meadowlark