

OASIS

Do you remember a childhood cartoon or a movie in which the character is staggering across the desert in the blazing sun, gasping for every breath, calling “water, water,” when in front of him appears a beautiful tropical oasis with palm trees and a lagoon-like pond?

Pretend you are a bird. You are a little yellow bird with rusty brown streaks on either side of your breast. You are a Yellow Warbler. Despite spending $\frac{3}{4}$ of the year in a tropical climate like Central America, you are the most common of all the Wood Warblers in North America. In your journey to find a mate and procreate, you will fly to breeding areas throughout most of the United States and Canada, even as far north as Alaska! In doing so, you will leave your tropical home in late April or early May, where your preferred diet of insects is easy to come by, and journey over 620 miles of open water across the Gulf of Mexico. If you make it that far, you will find yourself hungrier than ever before and will need to drop down to a place where you can feed for a day or two to build your fat stores back up so you can continue your journey. Flying primarily at night, you will hopscotch your way north, hopefully finding some insect laden oasis that you can land in each morning, eat, sleep a little bit and regain your strength before moving on again to find that perfect spot to go about the business of raising a family.

You are a little picky about your choice of neighborhood as most of your fellow birds are. Some birds prefer heavily treed areas, some birds prefer rocky outcroppings, some birds prefer open fields or tundra. Each species has its own niche. You like shrubby areas. A thicket along a fence row suits you just fine or maybe you will come across a copse of spruce trees. There are several things that you will look for when choosing your particular home: a suitable shrub or tree, preferably with a lot of branches so that a predator has less of a chance to get to your nest unnoticed, a water source where insects are plentiful, and maybe a few taller trees, telephone poles or fence posts where you can sing to attract a female to mate with.

So during your yearly journey, you will require oases for two different reasons. You must have fertile rest stops and you must have a destination. By setting aside undeveloped land for nature, oases are created that keep species like you alive and flourishing. Some land is set aside by governments and some by nature or habitat preservation organizations, but just as importantly, some oases are created by average people like you and me. Sunny Fields is one of these oases. To you, the little Yellow Warbler, the beauty and tranquility of the plantings, the bushes and the trees, the convenience of the parking areas and the availability of visiting

hours are not important. But the fact that it is there may directly affect your ability to survive!

You will be gone from Sunny Fields by the second week of August. Hopefully you had insect rich habitat in which to raise your young and fatten yourself up before starting to take the 1000+ mile trip back to your tropical wintering grounds. And hopefully along the journey, you will find more oases to feed in to sustain yourself. And birds that spent their summers further north may stop at Sunny Fields to find the bugs you left behind so that their trip might also be successful.

Can I ask you a question, Mr. Yellow Warbler? Why, as a human, should I really care whether you live or die and whether your species continues on this earth?

“Well first of all, I suppose because we have our place here. Just like you, we have inhabited this planet for a very, very long time. So I suppose it just plain wouldn't be very neighborly of you to wipe us out because you want more flat green lawns to look at or pavement to drive on. We are also contributing members of the society of this planet. Together with many other species of birds, we eat more bugs and insects than you can imagine! By doing that, we help plants stay healthier and you healthier too. By insuring there are healthier plants around, we aid in the production of oxygen into our atmosphere. Every little bit helps in keeping this planet and you, Mr. Human, healthy. As much as I shudder to think about it, some of us serve as food for other species of birds, mammals and reptiles. Hawks that might catch one of us unawares also feed on rodents and mammals, keeping their population down. We all depend on each other for survival in this world, no matter how big or how small we are and how unconnected we may seem to be. And of course, don't forget that, all modesty aside, I am a thing of beauty both to look at and to listen to. And what would this world be without beauty?”

After I leave for the winter, other birds like the Dark-eyed Junco may move into Sunny Fields. They will be here escaping the cold barren winters of lands further north. And once again places like Sunny Fields will serve as life sustaining oases for these species. Then, just when I think I am fat and happy and just want to take a nap, that old migration spell will come over me and I will do it all again. I sure hope Sunny Fields will still be there when I return.”