

by Arch McCallum

Longing (and Listening) for Golden-cheeks

Have you ever seen that bird singing on the cover? That incredibly gorgeous thing? I haven't. Although I do my best to make the most of every trip I take—I once drove a rented moving van, with car-dolly attached, onto the LSU campus to visit their museum—I've never managed to get to the tiny mid-Texas breeding range of the **Golden-cheeked Warbler** at the right time. On a different transcontinental trip, towing only a small-ish trailer behind a station wagon, I did take a detour to Dinosaur Valley State Park, where Golden-cheeks nest, but I was too late twice over. I arrived around ten on a July morning.

If you're going to see a rare bird, your best bet is to go to a place they're known to frequent, and that is usually a breeding site. (An easy Red-faced Cormorant in 1993 comes to mind.) But that is just the first step. The bird has to be at home, by which I mean somewhere near enough for you to detect it. Next it has to give you some cue that will allow you to detect it. Incubating birds—except those daring vireos that sing from the nest—usually don't. But individuals interested in deterring rivals or attracting mates want to be detected, and taken seriously, so they fill the air with song. Their need to communicate with their own

species gives us a chance to eavesdrop. As a result, you are some ten times more likely to hear a nesting passerine than to see one. But even during the courting season, birds take long breaks between episodes of singing, particularly as the day wears on. Had I arrived at that state park earlier, I might have heard the distinctive buzzy song of the Golden-cheek.

As you probably know, though, merely detecting a singing bird is little more than a tease. Often, many of them are going at it at once. If you're going to find the bird you're looking for, you need to know what to listen for. Acoustics is part of it. Golden-cheek songs are (usually) buzzy. Beyond acoustics is the arrangement of the sounds, or *syntax*. Golden-cheeks usually give you several longish buzzes at different pitches, and may speed up at the end. In a feature article in this issue, appearing on pp. 32–44, I lay out some of the basic patterns you will hear when listening to birdsong. And I suggest you practice listening for these patterns with the common birds near your home. That way you will notice if something unusual, like a Golden-cheeked Warbler, shows up in your neighborhood, and you'll have the trained ear you need when you make that special trip in search of a rarity.

