

Nesting History Brought to Life: Nest Quest Go!

Becca Rodomsky-Bish

On this seemingly ordinary nest record card (below) exists a fascinating story. The obvious story is about a Prothonotary Warbler in Calhoun County, Michigan, who built a nest in a *maple stub* that fledged four young in late June, 1939. What you might not notice on first glance is the observer who submitted this card, L. H. Walkinshaw. It turns out that L. H. Walkinshaw was a passionate citizen scientist who contributed this card, and thousands of others, to the North American Nest Record Card Program at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

of online volunteers in transcribing the invaluable data captured on each card. This collection amasses to roughly the same amount of the data currently available in the NestWatch database, thus potentially doubling the size of our nest record data with the completion of Nest Quest Go! With the addition of the nest record card data to NestWatch, we hope to be able to provide researchers with a more robust dataset to understand the historical changes of nesting birds in North America.

Nesting birds have encountered numerous challenges over the last century. What may be influencing nest survival? Which species seem to be adapting and which ones seem to be struggling? What do different localities tell us about nesting bird success? The questions to be explored from this dataset are endless. Making the data available from this large crowdsourcing program is a step in a very important direction of helping to understand nesting birds and provide conservation recommendations to improve their nesting success rates.

The process to participate in this project is easy! *Anyone can participate who has access to a computer or smartphone.* In Zooniverse, volunteers are transcribing these cards using simple, often smartphone-friendly, questions to quickly transcribe the data on the cards. To become a volunteer, log in to Zooniverse and create an account. All active Nest Quest Go! projects will be displayed on our Nest Quest Go! organization page. There will be hundreds of projects available for people to participate in over the next several years. We launched our first project, Nest Quest Go: Warblers in July 2019. Look for new

NORTH AMERICAN NEST RECORD CARD PROGRAM											
Species: Prothonotary warbler			YEAR 29			Shaded Boxes not to be completed by observer					
Observer (two initials, last name) In squares in space opposite →			L H W A L K I N S H A W			6 3 7 9 8 5					
Locality (in relation to nearest town) 4 mi SW Bellevue, Battle Creek River						Fill in if known					
County Calhoun Co., Convis Twp.						Elevation			Latitude		
State or Province Michigan						29 4 2 1 2 0 33			Longitude		
HABITAT (circle where appropriate)						34 49 9 9 9 9 9 41			8 5 44 0 0		
HABITAT (circle where appropriate)						46			46		
DOMINANT PLANT(S) IN HABITAT (list one or two)						49 29 11 0 0 1 55 3 6 1 1 0 0 4			47 18		
NEST SITE (circle where appropriate)						61 15			61 15		
PRINCIPAL PLANT OR STRUCTURE						63 29 1 0 0 1 0 0 0			63 29 1 0 0 1 0 0 0		
SUPPORTING NEST						63 29 1 0 0 1 0 0 0			63 29 1 0 0 1 0 0 0		
Height of Eggs Above Ground or Water in Feet (feet and tenths if under five feet)						72 Feet			2 5 76 Tenths		
If parasitized by Cowbird check here <input type="checkbox"/> If same pair had other nestings this year, indicate which this is (1, 2, 3)						77			77		
PLEASE COMPLETE BOTH SIDES OF THE CARD						78 79 80			78 79 80		

Prothonotary Warbler nest record card from Cornell Lab of Ornithology archives. Photo by Becca Rodomsky-Bish

The North American Nest Record Card Program ran from the 1960s to the early 2000s. Some earlier records, like this one, were submitted from people who had been doing citizen science for decades before it became a *thing*. In total, there are more than 300,000 nest record cards from this program at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology — more than 62,000 of these records contain bluebird data. This vital data has been awaiting an opportunity to see the light of day, to have the hidden nesting accounts revealed. That day has arrived with the help of a new online people-powered research tool called Zooniverse (<https://www.zooniverse.org/organizations/brbcornell/nest-quest-go>).

NestWatch (<https://nestwatch.org/>), a citizen-science project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is using Zooniverse to host digital files of each of our nest record cards online. They are soliciting the help



Archivist working on the nest record cards before the days of smartphones and personal computers.



Mountain Bluebird feeding nestlings in machinery nest.
Photo by Kevin Corwin

projects in the coming months including bluebirds, chickadees, hummingbirds, and many more. Each species, or group of species, have varying numbers of nest cards available.

If you have a favorite bird or group of birds that you would be interested in transcribing, sign up to receive our monthly eNews or join our Facebook Nest Quest Go! Group (follow the links on the Zooniverse website). New projects will be announced, statistics regarding existing or completed projects will be shared, and important news about this massive endeavor will be communicated through these channels. Each nest record tells a story, often multiple stories, and we encourage our participants to explore and share those they discover. In the transcription process, you may discover your own mystery to investigate.

Returning to the Prothonotary Warbler card (pictured on the facing page), recorded by L. H. Walkinshaw in 1939, Zooniverse volunteer Tim B.—himself an avid bird lover and citizen scientist—became interested in L. H. Walkinshaw’s story. After some digging, he discovered this person was Larry Walkinshaw, a long-time citizen scientist who contributed thousands of nest record cards between 1916 and 1984. Larry Walkinshaw also contributed to several other bird collections, such as the Smithsonian, by submitting photos, maps of nesting locations, papers on bird observations, and banding information to notable ornithological programs.

Tim B. found a biography on the life of Larry Walkinshaw, *On the Wings of Cranes*, by Lowell M. Schake, Larry’s son-in-law. It is the story of a dentist who was a passionate ornithologist in his spare time while contributing vast amounts of data for citizen science. A part of his life story is folded into the Nest Record Card history now entrusted to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. As we work to share the stories of all the birds whose lives are captured in our collection, we also learn a bit about the people who loved and conserved them.

Join the Nest Quest Go! (<https://www.zooniverse.org/organizations/brbcornell/nest-quest-go>) adventure. Participate by transcribing historical nesting data in Zooniverse so scientists can better understand the lives of birds. Maybe you’ll make a surprising discovery of your own in the process.

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