

“ORCHARD ORIOLES: 31 DAY OBSERVATION”

By Larry Waltz

For the last dozen years or so, my daily 3-mile walk has, by choice, stopped at the same turn-around spot: I call it my “birding patch”. Sixty-five years ago, I fondly remember this place as an active farm orchard and pasture with a pond. Now, thankfully, this multi-acre parcel of wetland meadow is shared by three families who are committed nature conservationists.

Therefore, I have the pleasure of year-round flora and fauna observations, through all seasons, and of course, witnessing the spectrum of local bird life. My life list numbers are enhanced by regularly visitation, but more importantly, there is the opportunity to discover species behavior over time. I am always learning, always surprised. This past year, 2021, for the first time in my 60 years of birding, I was a delighted to discover a pair of Orchard Orioles in nesting mode. To boot, the male was in first summer plumage (Feb-Aug), with not the rich chestnut color, but yellow and sporting a delightful “bib”/throat patch! For a month, the two birds orchestrated the full range of creation’s glory.

SOME ORCHARD ORIOLE NOTATIONS

(Alpha Code: “OROR”)

- **Characteristics:** comparing **Orchard VS Baltimore Orioles**
 - Size: OROR is smallest of all Orioles, often mistaken for a warbler.
 - Lighter weight: 0.67 oz **vs** 1.2 oz
 - Color: Male - dark chestnut w/hood **vs** bright orange; female - yellow/green **vs** drab orange.
 - Song: rich, lively, warbling with distinctive ringing end **vs** rich, short, clear, whistle notes.
 - Diet: insects, fruit and occasional tree blossoms **vs** insects, fruit, nectar, few spiders and snails.

- Cowbird host: common (passive host) **vs** uncommon (may eject egg).
- **Nesting:**
 - Orchard Orioles are monogamous.
 - Nest: built in 3-6 days by female with some help from male; suspended from forked terminal twig well hidden by leaves.
 - Incubator: Female primarily, with male supplying her food.
 - Incubation: 12 days.
- **Fledglings:**
 - Both parents feed young.
 - Young leave nest in 11-14 days.
 - Parents often divide fledglings and care for them separately.
 - Family units stay together until leaving in the fall.

FIELD NOTES

16May21 (7:30a):

Female seen first, thinking initially female was a Baltimore, until I see the male, who is yellow with the black bibb of a first spring male. She is carrying nesting material deep in the upper part of a young pear tree, site well hidden in new leaves. Nest: ten feet high. The bird flies into nearby hedgerow where she initiates breeding behavior, male responds. Identification confirmed: Orchard Orioles. First time seeing nesting process.

17May21 (7:50a):

Watching female bring nesting material, eyeing me all the while. With focused behavior, she quickly leaves. I follow her flight away and catch a glimpse of her choosing the next cache of material. Interestingly, amid her building, a mature male OROR in beautiful chestnut color, comes to investigate the pear tree activity. He stays there for three minutes and moves on without disturbing the site.

21May21 (8a):

Red-winged Blackbird investigates nest. Female could be on nest. Not confirmed this morning. I wonder if a female cowbird has visited.

31May21 (7:50a):

Bird on nest (head movement, eye on me). Leaving, she squeezes though upper limb. She returns a few minutes later and settles down.

1Jun21 (7:15a):

Yes! Female on nest, movement, then flies to nearby spruce tree, returns 10 mins. later and settles down. Male comes by and takes note of female, then leaves.

2Jun21 (7:35a):

Female continues on nest, leaves for 5 mins., returns and carefully settles down. (Wondering: "the young, tiny and delicate, to be squeezed in the nest's sack construction"). Am learning to spend time with confusing detail with this well-hidden nest site: high angular tail, not twig ... black pupil eye, not small pear fruit on tiny stem ... beak, not nesting material.

5Jun21 (7:45a):

Looks discouraging, no activity, nest looks disheveled (recent storm or predators?). Oops! there is one (male?/female?), non-feeding behavior.

6Jun21 (7:10a):

For a half hour, watch male, stop and go, feeding young, noticed small bits between mandibles, and "cleaning" nest when leaving. Feels like male is guarding nest (seems less stressed when I move further away). Yes, there are young, and the family seems OK.

7Jun21 (7:50a):

Male continues to be the tending parent. Getting use to me?

8Jun21 (7:30a):

Both M/F feeding this morning, on one occasion, one right after another. This is encouraging. Thus far, nesting is a success. Parents seem to "stage" their approach to site, including diminutive chirp, from a nearby mature cherry tree, then fly to the nest. I approach the site cautiously and remain at about 50' away. I like the way the parents tenderly approach the top of nest, then feed and glean debris.

9Jun21 (7:30a):

This morning both M/F actively feeding (five trips in 20 mins. between them). Food: very small insects, I guess; mulberries starting to come along and perhaps young introduced. I have learned to stay 50' away now; male seems happier and actually a song came my way?

10Jun21 (7:20a):

Upon arrival, male approaches nest via lower branches, climbs to young. Feeds, surveys and leaves this time by semi-circling above me (observing me?), and beelines well over trees as if anxious to secure more distant food. Have noticed this trajectory before. M/F use the nearby tree hedgerow as staging area and survey me before flying into the nest site. They are learning my presence is not a threat (hope so). Female searches for food closer to the nest site; male seems to go in opposite direction.

12Jun21 (7:45a):

Seven M/F fly-ins feeding young in 20 mins. of continuous activity. Exiting birds, not wasting time, do straight line fly to secure next morsels. Interesting how return flight is so quick, I often miss their return entrance because there is limited visual leaf and branch disturbance. When young alone, heads can be seen bobbing above nest edge. Getting harder to see nest structure with maturing leaves. Birds are using soft locator calls as they glean hedge row trees. Male is getting his darker color. At one point the male goes to top leafless ash tree branch and sings a lusty song. (Wondered: "Is he saying, as he takes a break, 'so far, so good' or 'want my kids to know my voice!'").

13Jun21 (7:20a):

Body movement of nestlings noted, seem too large for such a small sack-like nesting structure. Perhaps an OROR nest material has expanding flexibility like a hummingbird's? Parents vocalizing at a distance; both feeding. Female reviews me as she climbs up internal tree structure.

14Jun21 (7:45a):

Today, male gives me sustained close look (on nearby light pole tension wire, close to nest site). Is this behavior suggesting something is different? Chosen feeding source is closer to home base? Indeed, young out of nest, at least two are in nearby dense bushes being fed by one parent (insects, caterpillars?). The family has moved! Parents busy gleaning insects in leaves, move back and forth watching and feeding young. Young display flutter wing beat. Look healthy. Male is developing darker feathers. How handsome he is becoming. Beautiful!

15Jun21 (8:00a):

No activity. Nostalgia. Like going to an empty concert hall now, with only great memories and sounds of what was. Yes, the bird family has moved on to another location. This “patch” is now sacred space.

Photo Credits:

- 1) Catherine McEntee/Audubon Photography Awards 2013
- 2) Will Stuart/National Audubon

