



BRIGHT SPOTS IN WINTER "Butter-butts"

Rich Stallcup

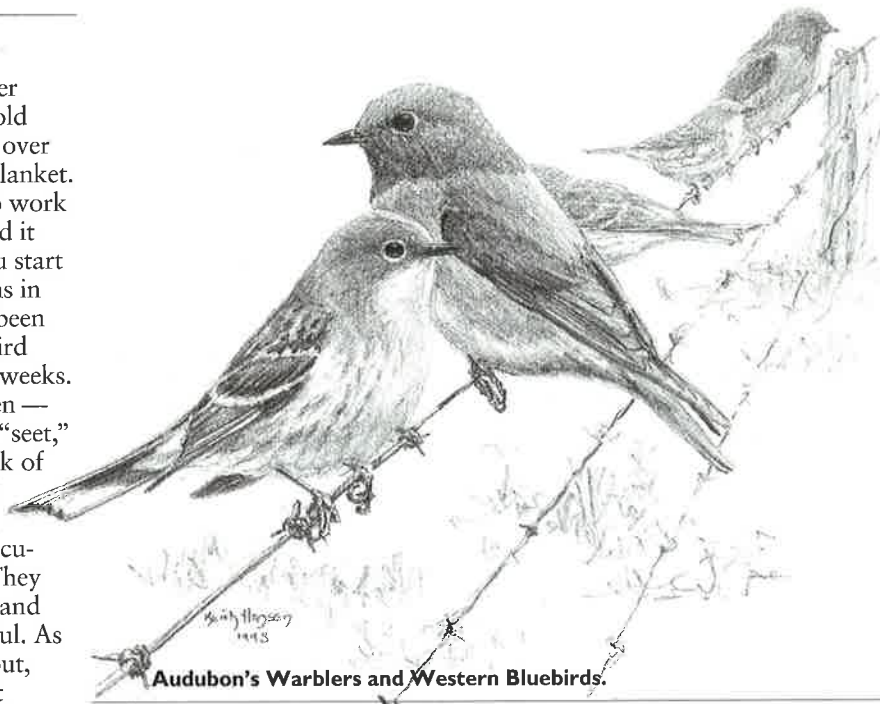
IT'S A GLOOMY winter morning, and the cold gray sky hangs low over everything like a wet blanket. You're on your way to work just after daybreak, and it will be dark before you start home. It's the doldrums in birdland; there hasn't been anything on the rare bird alert worth chasing in weeks. This is *depressing*. Then — "tsip," "tsup," "tsip," "seet," "tsup" — a calling flock of mixed Yellow-rumped Warblers swirls into a eucalyptus tree as if vacuumed out of the sky. They are active, gregarious, and seem amazingly cheerful. As they flit and swish about, their yellow rumps put patches of native color into your day. It looks like things are going to be OK after all.

The Lump

IN 1973, AUDUBON'S Warbler and Myrtle Warbler were lumped into a single species by the American Ornithologists' Union. The stated reason was that a study had proven that in places where the two forms are sympatric in spring (i.e., nest in the same area), pair-bonding is random: there is no preference for one's own phenotype. If true, it was a good call by the current definition of specificity (but read on). Yellow-rumped Warbler was selected as the common name, and *Dendroica coronata* (previously used for Myrtle) the scientific name. Finding "Yellow-rumped" a bit stuffy, our friend Gordon Bolander coined the nickname "Butter-butt," which is now in common usage by birders across the country.

The Question

IF THERE IS RANDOM BREEDING in the zone of sympatry, the big question is, "Where are all the hybrids?" Since the large, overlapping territory is in western Canada, and since we know (through banding records) that some or all of our Myrtle Warblers originate there, shouldn't



Audubon's Warblers and Western Bluebirds.

we see lots of "hybrids" on the California coast in winter, along with their parents?

Both Myrtle and Audubon's warblers are abundant wintering birds here on the coast and are also easy to tell apart by plumage and voice. Nearly every bird can be easily called Myrtle or Audubon's: no waffling, no question, clear decisive identification! I have examined thousands of Butter-butts in winter and found only three or four that may have been intermediate. Scott Terrill, an ace field ornithologist, has found "maybe five or six" in his long experience in Arizona and along the central and southern California coast. The PRBO Palomarin field station has banded only two in over 20 years.

So where *are* the hybrids? Three possible answers come to mind. 1) The hybrids are wintering together in an unknown spot: not likely! 2) The sympatric zone is really smaller than suggested by range maps, so contact is very limited: the birds might be truly conspecific. 3) The sympatric zone is large, but interbreeding is only occasional, so few "hybrids" are fledged: the birds are in fact separate species.

The view from here favors scenario #3, but for scientific truth the field work needs to be done again — a second opinion!

The Identification

SPRING-PLUMAGED BIRDS are easy, but in winter some individuals, especially young ones, can be tricky.

Face. Myrtles have a more complex facial pattern than do Audubon's: their expressions are very different. In Myrtle, the auricular (the teardrop-shaped patch behind and below the eye) is clearly darker than the rest of the head; the contrast is enhanced, because the auricular is surrounded by white: above, by a thin white eyebrow that starts at the base of the bill and runs through the upper eyeing to the rear of the auricular; below, by the sharply defined white throat; behind, by an

extension of the white throat that curls up around the back of the face to a point nearly meeting the posterior bit of eyebrow.

The Audubon's' auricular is the same color as the rest of the head (light brown), and the only interruptions to the plain face are the bold, white, broken eyeing and a fleck of white in the lores. (In Myrtle, only the under-eyeing is obvious, since the upper half is absorbed in the white eyebrow.) The throat patch of Audubon's, when viewed from below, is a triangle with rounded corners that doesn't wrap around the back of the face as it does in Myrtle.

Throat color. If the throat has yellow feathers, the bird is an Audubon's, and if it is chalk-white, the bird is a Myrtle. Many hatching-year birds of both kinds have off-white or tan throats and cannot be identified by this character alone. To sort these, look at the shape of the throat patch (see Face, above).

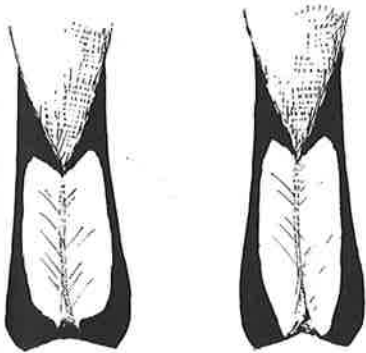
Breast. Myrtle Warbler has a white chest with a partial necklace of well defined blackish streaks extending down the sides. Audubon's has on its breast and sides a wash of pale brown that contains only indistinct blurry streaks.

Tail pattern. Both birds have large white spots on the wide inner webs of the outer tail feathers. Although age and gender

F O C U S 35

influence the number of patterned feathers slightly, Myrtles usually have two (sometimes three), and Audubon's usually have five (sometimes four) on each side. Many individuals can be identified by their small or large tail flashes, e.g., when fly-catching.

Another great field mark (maybe the best), pointed out by Dave Sibley, is the underside of the folded tail. Myrtle has *more white* on the two outer rectrices,



Undersides of tails: Audubon's (left) and Myrtle (right).

which fold beneath the others: the white covers most of the underside of the tail, including much of the tip. Audubon's has *less white* there, leaving the entire tip of the ventral tail surface dark.

Myrtle Warbler forages in a sapsucker tree.



DAVE SIBLEY

Behavior. The two forms have much behavior in common and sometimes occur in mixed flocks. Butter-butts are more aerial than other wood warblers and do more fly-catching and feeding in the open. Myrtles tend to travel in large, homogeneous flocks, while Audubon's often travel singly or in small groups, often in flocks with other insectivorous species.

Doesn't it seem odd that Audubon's Warblers habitually flock on open grassland with Western Bluebirds, while nearby Myrtles never do? Or that Myrtles are often found attending sapsucker excavations, ignored by Audubon's?

Call notes. The call notes, delivered frequently by these two warblers in winter, are distinctive and can be identified specifically by experienced birders every time. Call notes aren't easy to describe in words, but if we say the Audubon's is a rather soft, discreet "tsip" or "chep," then the Myrtle's is a harder, flat "tsup" or "chup." Go out and listen: you'll learn them quickly.

Who Cares?

UNLESS YOU ARE A FANATIC LISTER, it doesn't really matter whether Myrtle and Audubon's warblers are full species, subspecies, or superspecies (and it is beyond question that they themselves don't care).

The two Butter-butts are different kinds of birds, easy to tell apart, that put patches of native color into gray winter days.

Palomarin Songbird Field Day for PRBO members: see notice on back page!

KEITH HANSEN

THANKS TO THE SKIPPERS of the Farallon Patrol, PRBO's field station on Southeast Farallon has been supplied with groceries, mail, staff biologists, and volunteers for the past six months.

JUNE 6	Stan Starkey	<i>Selene</i>
JUNE 19	Bill Fraser	<i>Rouser</i>
JULY 6	Frank Hall	<i>Close Hall'd</i>
JULY 17	Oscar Cooke	<i>Sampaquita</i>
JULY 31	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
AUG 14	Milton Tanner	<i>Bellavia</i>
AUG 28	Dave Hurley	<i>Limerick II</i>
SEPT 11	Peter Schultz	<i>Hansiatic</i>
SEPT 25	Stu Knott	<i>Knottylus</i>
OCT 9	Tom Charkins	<i>Kumbaya</i>
OCT 23	Jeff Meyer	<i>Grunt V</i>
NOV 6	Ralph Noble	<i>Starbuck</i>
NOV 20	Ron Levine	<i>Nausicaa</i>
DEC 4	Greg Stach	<i>Lebensraum</i>
DEC 11	Bill Fraser	<i>Rouser</i>
DEC 18	Stan Starkey	<i>Selene</i>

New for PRBO Members

DUE LARGELY to the generous support of our Board of Directors, PRBO has acquired new membership software and a computer to handle membership information and donor histories. With our membership nearing 4000, we need this equipment to handle an increasing volume of correspondence and information. Thanks to our Board's commitment, PRBO is in a better position to serve our diverse membership.

To further improve your satisfaction with PRBO, *we ask all members to complete the enclosed questionnaire.* Your cooperation returning this survey to PRBO is greatly appreciated.