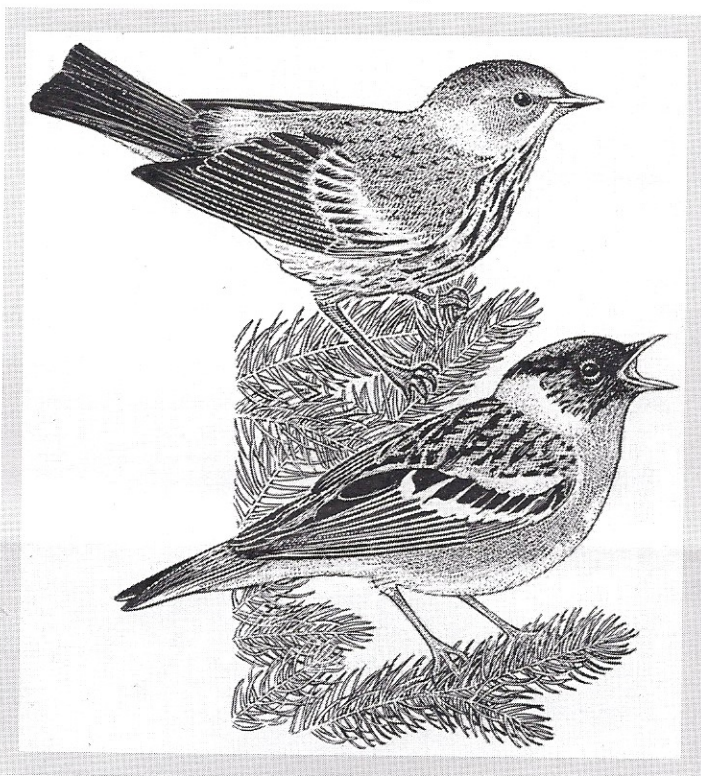


In Memoriam: Ann Lucy and the Grand Old Trees of Cabin John

How well do we know our neighbors or their hobbies? About twelve years ago in front of our house, I spotted a diminutive woman with binoculars staring up at a tall Eastern Red Cedar. She had found something.



Cape May Warbler (top) and Bay-breasted Warbler in a Spruce tree.

I was on my way out for a walk along Cabin John Creek with the dogs. It was late April and the wood warblers were back in town, on their spring migration from their wintering areas in the tropics to their breeding grounds stretching from Maryland and parts south to the Yukon.

“Hi. What are you looking for?” I asked.

“Cape May warblers,” she replied, and introduced herself as Ann Lucy, a long-time resident of 78th St in Cabin John, like me. We had never really talked before, and I had no idea she was a birder. Even more embarrassing, I had no idea that we could observe Cape May warblers, or their sound-alikes, the Bay-breasted warblers, gracing our street on their way north. I knew that these two species were often referred to by expert naturalists as “Bay-Mays”—a reminder that you need to listen

closely to separate the similar high-pitched songs of these related species. I also knew that Bay-Mays preferred to forage for caterpillars, moths, and other insects in the boughs of conifers (pines, firs, spruces, junipers, cedars, cypress). But I was delighted to learn of Ann’s discovery: sometimes these magnificent warblers visited the tall conifers on our street for refueling on their way to Canada.

Cape May and Bay-breasted warblers are part of a cluster of gorgeous, active birds smaller than sparrows in the genus *Setophaga* (meaning moth-eater). There are about 33 species in this genus and many overlap in where they live. One of the great evolutionary biologists of the twentieth century, Robert MacArthur of Princeton University, a mathematician by training who happened to love birds, posed a fascinating question that drove ecological research for decades: when you have such a diversity of different species living in the same space, how do they all coexist? Why doesn’t one species drive all the others to extinction in a given area? The answer? Upon close examination it was discovered that the five warbler species that hunted caterpillars and insects in conifers used slightly different feeding niches. The Cape May and Bay-breasted plus the flaming orange-and-black Blackburnian warbler, the Black-throated green warbler whose song resembles the Shakespearean punnific, “Trees, trees, murmuring trees,” and the less poetic but equally beautiful Yellow-rumped warblers (disparagingly called butter-butts by contemptive birders) feed at different heights in a conifer or in the branches of the tree at different distances from the trunk. In this manner, which MacArthur termed resource or niche partitioning, they were able to coexist. An illustrative diagram of the physical space for each species on its preferred part of the conifer has appeared in almost every ecology textbook published since his landmark study. Ann knew that what she had seen was a Cape May warbler because that was the warbler species that preferred the very tops of a conifer.

There is more to this story, though.


Ann Lucy died unexpectedly on December 31, 2015 at the age of 75. There was little fanfare in Cabin John. She had led a quiet life here after a long career as a successful Certified Public

Accountant. Like many who owned small charming bungalows on large lots in Cabin John, her house was sold to a developer, torn down, and as I write, a much larger structure is taking its place. In the front of Ann's house had stood her pride and joy and a blessing to those of us who love nature, two giant conifers, a spruce (non-native but the warblers still perched there), and a handsome Eastern red cedar (eastern juniper) that produced a huge winter crop of juniper (gin) berries that were then devoured by cedar waxwings and other beauties.

One day, a tree service company came by to cut down these majestic trees. Several of us called the owner of the construction company that had purchased the lot. He told us that what he was doing was legal and that his instructions to the tree fellers were to cut only three trees in front (he said he did not know of the value of these trees to wildlife). In fact, the tree crew cut down all of the big trees on the property except for one non-native cypress that does not produce fruit for birds.

Ann would surely have been outraged to see her beloved trees obliterated, as were we, her neighbors. The developer did have the formal legal right to chop these trees to the ground, but that, in my opinion, makes it no less a crime against nature.

The construction project could have spared these trees, just as over-eager developers now operating across Cabin John too quickly choose to remove, often unnecessarily, big trees from properties without consideration of its effect on wildlife and the greater ecology that so enriches our area.

Ann's family requested that donations be made in Ann's name to the Montgomery Bird Club of the Maryland Ornithological Society. Might we not honor our deceased neighbors, like Ann Lucy, and offer a gift to future generations by sparing the grand old trees of Cabin John and the wildlife that calls them either home or, like the Cape May Warblers, a resting stop on their journey north? Just as, in geological time, Cabin John is a mere resting stop for us? — 


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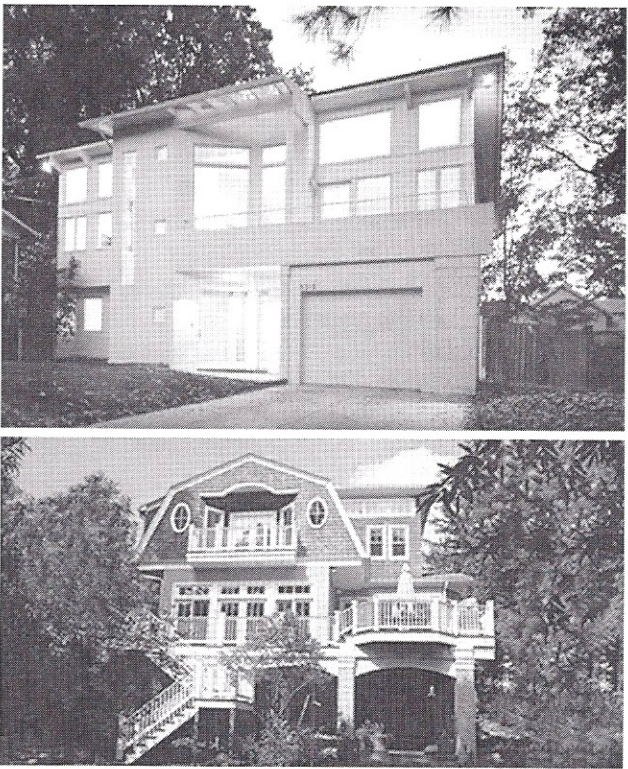
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