



# ***WEST MARIN WILD***

**By Jeff Miller**

**Volume II - New Years 2006/2007**

The **Townsend's Warblers** are here! I know not all of you may be as excited about their arrival, but please humor me. I'm new to birding and given that warblers are generally small and hard to identify and Townsend's are *Really Bright Yellow* with distinctive markings, you can understand me getting a tad excitable. Although I first noticed these strikingly colored yellow and black birds around Bolinas in early December, the Marin Audubon Society ([www.marinaudubon.org](http://www.marinaudubon.org)) notes they first arrive in Marin County in mid-August and the last stragglers depart by mid-May.

Townsend's Warblers (*Dendroica townsendi*) are pleasant and sociable little birds less than 5 inches tall. They have a dark crown and yellow breast, but what really sets them apart are vibrant yellow stripes splashed gaudily around their dark ear patches. These electric yellow facemasks give them the appearance of miniature lemon-themed superheroes.

Warblers that winter here (and along the entire Pacific coast from British Columbia to southern CA) spend their summers in pine and spruce forests on the Queen Charlotte Islands of B.C. Other Townsend's Warblers from Alaska, the rest of B.C. and the Pacific Northwest migrate to southwestern U.S. and Central America. The Point Reyes Bird Observatory ([www.prbo.org](http://www.prbo.org)) reports that Townsend's Warblers are one of the most common species caught and banded by biologists at their Palomarin Field Station.

Only the males sing, and they begin practicing their sweet serenades before leaving their wintering grounds. Their song is a buzzed *zee-zee-zee-bzz-zee* or a raspy high *weezy, weezy, weezy, tweea*, rising in pitch, but dropping at the end. Their call is a sharp *tup* or *tsik*.

In their breeding range these warblers forage high in the tree canopy for insects, caterpillars and spiders, sometimes hovering to glean insects in flight. In winter they will also eat seeds, berries and plant nectar. Warblers wintering in Central American cloud forests will slurp down honeydew (a sugary liquid) as it is excreted from insects. They will defend territories around trees infested with these insects against other birds. Like most third graders, Townsend's Warblers cannot resist a tasty mixture of peanut butter, cheese and marshmallows (I'm not making this up), so stick that in your bird feeder. If you smear it, they will come.

On the subject of bird feeders, the PRBO has a few guidelines regarding feeder responsibility. Before you begin feeding wild birds, consider: are there cats in the area you can't control; can you go the distance and continue feeding birds you attract throughout the winter; will your feed attract European Starlings, House Sparrows, rats or other creatures that negatively impact native species; and is there adequate shelter where your birds can flee from hawks?

PRBO recommends feeding songbirds only in winter (begin in late September and wean birds off your feed by late April). Feeding during the local breeding season may distract nesting birds from their domestic duties and increase potential nest predators, like jays and squirrels. You can help prevent transmittable avian diseases at your feeder by keeping it clean: use a mild bleach solution and rinse and dry it thoroughly.

*West Marin Wild* hopes to be a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Please send wildlife sightings, interesting animal stories or encounters, topic suggestions, questions or corrections to Box 111, Bolinas.