

## WARBLERS WORM THEIR WAY INTO HISTORY

By Dennis Huckabay

*“Yesterday I thought I heard a brief ‘purity’ – the bluebird’s call.”*

*(Letter from Alger Hiss to his family from Lewisburg Federal Prison, March 19, 1953)*

History was made here in November when two Buena Vista Audubon stalwarts spotted two eastern warblers almost never seen in San Diego County. Both were seen at or near San Elijo Lagoon. Steve Brad, known to many of us as a leader of our field trips, saw a worm-eating warbler, and Terry Hunefeld, who developed and oversees a hugely popular pelagic birding program for BVAS, saw a prothonotary warbler. Neither warbler was ever recorded here prior to the 1960s, and there have been only a few sightings of the birds since then. Both are birds of the eastern forests. Worm-eating warblers, sparrow-like, ground-nesting birds, can be found during the summer breeding season on wooded Appalachian hillsides from southern New England to the Gulf States, foraging in shrubs and subcanopy layers for insects, spiders, caterpillars, and slugs (not worms).



*Worm-eating warbler*  
—E. Kallen

They winter in forests of southern Mexico and along the Caribbean slope of Central America south to Panama.

Prothonotary warblers got their name in the Eighteenth Century from Louisiana Creoles who thought the birds’ plumage resembled the golden robes of the protonotarius, a scribe or notary public in Catholic ecclesiastical courts. A more apt name might be the “golden swamp warbler”, both for the males’ brilliant golden head and chest and the bird’s partiality to flooded forests and bottomlands in the Southeast. Prothonotary warblers winter mainly in mangrove swamps and coastal tropical forests of Cost Rica, Panama and Colombia.



*Prothonotary Warbler at San Elijo Lagoon* —E. Kallen

Prothonotary warblers figured in the history of the Cold War. Birder Alger Hiss was accused in 1948 of being a Communist spy in the 1930s. A graduate of Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law, Hiss went to Washington in the early years of Roosevelt’s New Deal to serve in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, an agency established to help farmers weather the Depression. From there he went on to the State Department and accompanied FDR to Yalta in 1945 to prepare with Churchill and Stalin the geopolitical configuration of the post-World War II world. Hiss then served as the United Nations’ first Secretary General when the worldwide organization was set up in San Francisco in 1945, and went on to become President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1947.

In 1948, before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of being a Communist in the 1930s, and swore that Hiss, while a State Department official, had given Chambers secret Government papers. Chambers, an apostate Communist, had been a member of the Party from 1925 to 1938. He alleged that he had known Hiss and his wife intimately in the 1930s and had been a guest in their home. Among other things, he revealed that Hiss and his wife were enthusiastic birders. Here is Chambers' testimony to the Committee on August 7, 1948:

HUAC Research Director Ben Mandel: *Did Mr. Hiss have any hobbies?*

Chambers: *Yes he did. They both (Hiss and his wife) had the same hobby — amateur ornithologists, bird observers. They used to get up early in the morning ... to observe birds. I recall once they saw, to their great excitement, a prothonotary warbler.*

Congressman John McDowell, Republican from New Jersey and also a birder: *A very rare specimen?*

Chambers: *I never saw one. I am also fond of birds.*

On August 16 Hiss was called by the Committee to respond to Chambers' accusations of familiarity. Unaware of Chambers' earlier testimony, Hiss responded to the Committee's loaded questions:

Congressman Richard Nixon, Republican from California: *Is your wife interested in ornithology?*

Hiss: *My wife is interested in ornithology, as I am, through my interest. Maybe I am using too big a*

*word to say an ornithologist because I am pretty amateur, but I have been interested in it since I was in Boston. I think anyone who knows me would know that.*

Congressman McDowell: *Did you ever see a prothonotary warbler?*

Hiss: *I have, right here on the Potomac. Do you know that place?*

Nixon: *Have you ever seen one?*

Hiss: (Ignoring Nixon). *Did you see it in the same place?*

McDowell: *I saw one in Arlington.*

Hiss: *They come back and nest in those swamps. Beautiful yellow head, a gorgeous bird.*

As Chambers later said: "(T)he prothonotary warbler, (is) a bird little bigger than a half-dollar whose name many people hesitate to pronounce, and which I have never seen. It was that beautiful bird, glimpsed in a moment of wonder, one summer morning some fourteen years before, that

first clinched the Committee's conviction that I must have known Alger Hiss."

Hiss denied that he had ever been a Communist. Based on testimony about Hiss's birding and other information that Chambers proffered about Hiss and his family that only an intimate associate would be expected to know, Hiss was indicted for perjury. His first trial ended in a hung jury in 1949. Tried again, Hiss was convicted in 1950 and sentenced to five years in the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.



*Hiss testifies before the House committee*

Hiss spent 44 months in prison, walking out just after Thanksgiving, 1954. Decades later, when writing his autobiography, he could bring to mind only a solitary moment of joy from his years in Lewisburg – a morning when, on the way to his storeroom job in the spring of 1952, he saw and heard a rose-breasted grosbeak singing from the top of the only tree in the prison yard:

“What would have been an exciting event for me at any time brought a surge of intense enjoyment. The bird’s song was lengthy and repeated more than once. A small group gathered, watching and listening silently. When the grosbeak finished, no one spoke as we went to our workplaces. I was refreshed; my senses were sharpened as if by a great aesthetic experience. I cannot think of another time when my spirits were so lifted that I was oblivious to my grim, oppressive surroundings.”



*Whittaker Chambers, confessed spy and Hiss’s accuser.*

Hiss’s son Tony has written a memoir of his father, using his father’s letters from prison – three-a-week, two pages long, all that were allowed – to tell the story of Alger Hiss’s life and of his own experience as a young boy swept up in the turmoil of the trial that marked the opening of the Cold War. Here is one of Hiss’s letters to his family (April 7, 1953), recounting the time in the 1930s when he first borrowed a friend’s binoculars to look up at a bird in a forest clearing:

“The first sight through glasses of a resplendent wild bird is breathtaking. The colors are so brilliant and alive, the bird itself is so contained ... and ‘competent’. You see the bird whole, as a fellow personality – the way his or her ‘friends and relations’ do (at least that is the way it *seems!*).”

Tony Hiss (nine to twelve years old when his father was imprisoned) admits that many of his father’s attempts to yoke his son to “the fixed lights of his life or the shining discoveries he made at Lewisburg” passed him by. The giant thunderstorms, the moon, the evening star, or the “full bowl of the sky”, which Hiss could observe from his prison window, left his son with no special feelings of

kinship. “I actively rebelled against bird-watching”, writes Tony. It was only later that Hiss’s son, “clinging to sunsets”, began to reorganize his thinking around the “bright spots” that made repeated appearances in his father’s letters from prison.

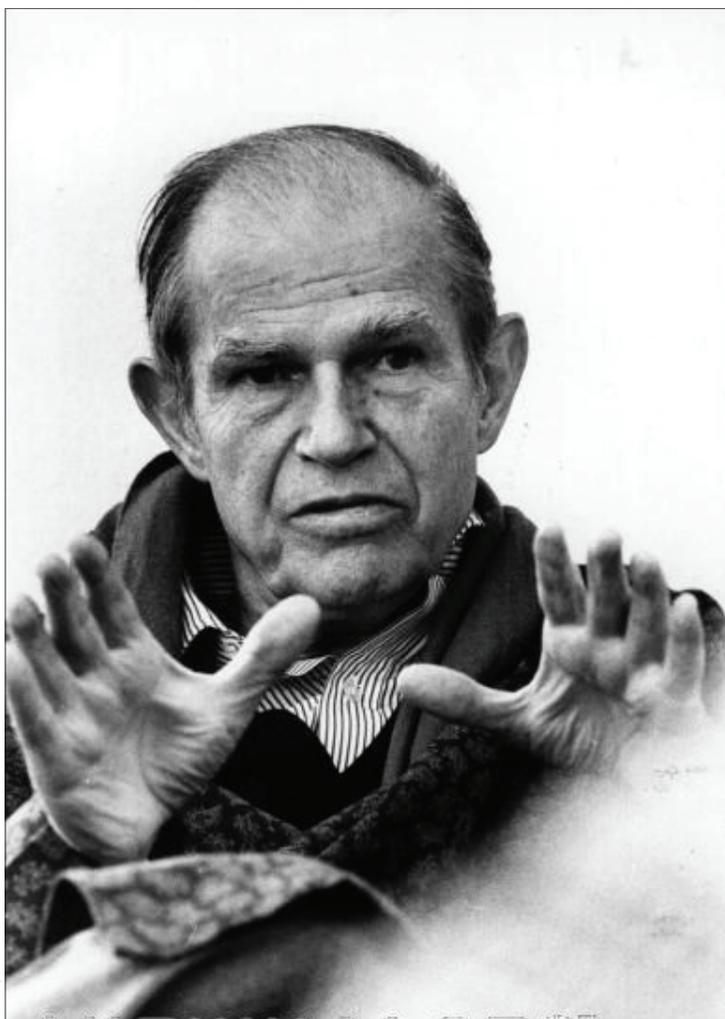
Tony eventually learned from his father’s letters that “places needed to be listened to every bit as carefully as people did”. On August 3, 1952, Hiss wrote his family from prison that “rewarding observation is not the result of a rare ‘something worth looking at’, but comes to one who is ‘capable of seeing’ the constant and ubiquitous marvels of life”. Despite Hiss’s assertion that the pleasures of everyday Nature are better than the rare “something worth looking at”, he apparently was a ‘lister’. On October 24, 1954, he added three species to his “Lewisburg list” (a hermit thrush, a jay’s cry and “a visible and audible chickadee”).

Hiss came out of prison, his career in ruins. In New York, he lived on his wife’s work at a bookstore and the \$10,000 advance for his book on the case ([In the Court of Public Opinion](#), which appeared in 1957 to mixed reviews and poor sales).

He took a course in touch typing and speed writing in midtown Manhattan and failed. He found a job with Feathercombs, Inc., a company that made women's hair barrettes of looped piano wire; Feathercombs was soon driven out of business by a major manufacturer of plastic hair combs. After five months of unemployment, when he wished he could find a job teaching or working with an emergent African nation as an adviser, he found a job in 1960 selling stationery and printing in Manhattan, a job he kept (longer than any other in his life) until he retired in the late 1970s. It was easy, Hiss said in his autobiography: "Business executives who received me genially were looking forward to saying at dinner parties, 'guess who wants to sell me rubber bands and paper clips'".

I met Alger Hiss in the spring of 1968, just returned from three-and-a-half years teaching in East Africa. Jane, my college sweetheart, and I had just married. (Jane was to die in 1970 of an African cancer, Burkett's lymphoma, that she had contracted when she came out to teach and be with me in Kenya). I was scared that I would be drafted and sent to Vietnam, but was told by a college friend working in New York City for Mayor John Lindsay that if I moved to New York and taught in the public schools there I would be assured of a draft deferment. In January 1968 I began teaching at Intermediate School 201 in East Harlem, a school that was then deep into a dispute between local parents and the city-wide board of education. Jane and I signed up for an evening class at the New School for Social Research on the New Deal, taught by Alger Hiss. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives at the time were reminiscent of the New Deal, when the civil rights movement was still multi-racial (I had gone to Mississippi for Freedom Summer 1964) and opposition to the war in Vietnam provoked, in Hiss's words, "spirited public participation somehow akin to the popular spirit of the mid-1930s". Hiss was proud of how he and his New Deal col-

leagues had stopped the worst ravages of the Depression and set up agencies and policies that, until the deregulation mania of the last few decades put us in our present predicament, set the stage for years of postwar prosperity. At the end of the lectures, discussion continued with Hiss, once or twice joined by his son Tony, in a nearby Green-



wich Village bar. One afternoon that spring I came up out of the subway on my way home from a rough day at IS201 and ran into Mr. Hiss at the top of the steps. We stopped and talked – and talked and talked and talked – about my experiences of teaching in newly independent Kenya, about teaching in an inner-city school and about wresting control of local schools from the ossified bureaucrats at the city-wide Board of Education. We also talked about birds.

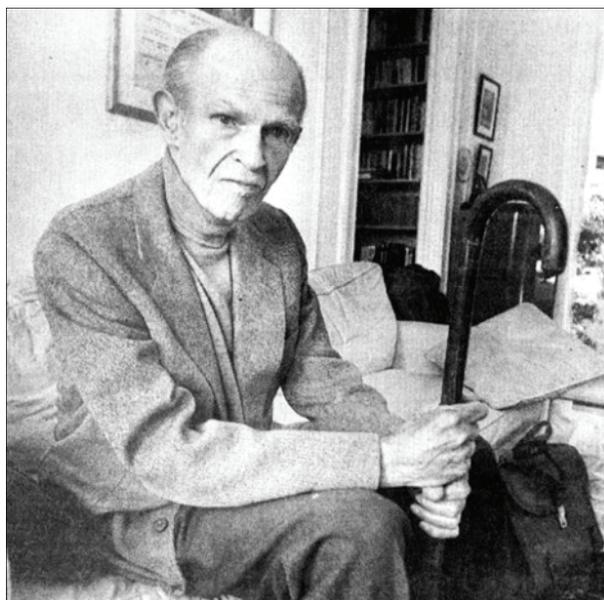
Hiss's son Tony wrote that late in his life his father became exceptionally good at talking with and listening to much younger people. "For thirty years and more", Tony wrote in the late 1990s, "I've been hearing stories, first from people a little older than me, then from those my age, and finally from an even larger number ten and twenty years younger, about how they will never forget that when they were teenagers, or in college, or working at their first job, how a chance meeting with Alger taught them to see themselves with a new purpose."

That certainly was the case with me. All along I knew that I wanted a career in teaching or public service, and my contacts with Mr. Hiss fortified my choice. Jane and I were invited out to the Hiss's summer place on Long Island. With Mr. Hiss I saw my first "old squaw" drake (now called more politically correctly long-tailed duck) on a bitterly cold January morning on Jamaica Bay. Together we saw a brilliant male Scarlet Tanager (another first) in Central Park on a late spring day a few days before Jane died.

I don't know if Alger Hiss was a Communist; he denied ever having been one until the day he died in 1996. Records made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union are inconclusive. Hiss was not able to marshal a convincing defense against the familiarity and accusations presented by Whittaker Chambers. But despite the damaging testimony, Hiss does not seem to me to be the sort of man who

could have so serenely asked his family and friends to trust him if he were guilty. They stood by him for the rest of his life while he worked hard for decades to maintain his integrity and innocence.

Guilty or not, through his public service Alger Hiss made the world a better place before he was brought down. The symbolism of the man and his trials is still compelling, still unresolved in the court of public opinion. But one small fact does stand out above the drama, imagery, opinion and judgment of the man: Alger Hiss loved birds, and the same prothonotary warbler that helped bring him down also provides him vindication.



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