

WARBLERS IN SOUTHERN NEW YORK

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I. "SOUTHERN" WARBLERS

Central New York represents an aggregate of breeding warblers that offers many ornithological opportunities, both in questions asked and in possibilities of problems solved. (It should be noted at the outset that this article will raise many problems in local distribution and solve very few.) The fact that Central New York is a portion of the northern limit of certain "southern" warblers and similarly the southern limit of certain more "northern" warbler forms permits a careful study of small, restricted populations of the species in question.

Further, the small number of individuals of any single species (see below) would indicate that very few local areas meet the species' requirements and/or that the small population present has some special adaptive factors, either greater range of tolerances of conditions or acceptance of ecological conditions not suitable to a greater percentage of the individuals of the species at, say, the species' population center. One can not uniformly call the areas involved "marginal" breeding areas, as the birds are apparently successful in yearly production of young, return year after year to the same area, and, in some cases, give evidence of expansion to sectors known to have been unoccupied previously. Such a sequence of species phenomena would not support the premise that these "oases" of southern warblers are marginal habitat.

First, of course, one must ask, "What area?" Briefly, the area to be discussed encompasses the four counties around Oneida Lake (Madison, Oneida, Onondaga, and Oswego Counties), and Cayuga County north of Route 31. Anyone may well say that this is not all of Central New York, and that such a narrow delimitation ranks at least provincial, if not inaccurate. Let us strike a middle position, accept the definition as chauvinistic in principle, and call it regional in fact.

Second, how have the species in question been studied? The present picture stems from a ten-year (1948-1958) study of the warblers in question by the author, plus a compilation of data from other local birders through this period, with earlier material from various annotated checklists, local and regional publications, and theses of summer works published through the New York State College of Forestry (see Bibliography).

The major question that each record or observation of a "southern" warbler (for list of same, vide *infra*) raises is simply, "Why does this species occur only in limited numbers or limited sectors of the area under discussion?" And the answer presented here is frankly an evasion, as what can be given is only "Where" this species occurs, and, indeed, this is known only in part. A further problem exists as to why a species occurs regularly in a specific area with apparent complete absence from, or avoidance of, similar, even larger, adjacent areas. What is tolerable about one area, intolerable about the other? The only prospect at present is to give indications of what appear to be requirements and/or distribution and, on the basis of comparison with other areas, both locally and range-wide, find common factors or specific differences.

One of the major problems is determination of "successful" breeding of the species. The Federation of New York State Bird Clubs has established criteria for evidence of nesting, but any of the criteria extend only through a *single* season. The repeated presence of a species through several breeding seasons would also seem to be a logical but indirect proof of successful breeding, particularly if increasing numbers of individuals are involved. Admittedly a single singing male could summer at the periphery of the species range, but it is doubtful whether individuals would do this persistently, or that apparent pairs would also (i. e. without breeding).

A further consideration is the problem of reoccupancy of an area yearly versus rechecking of an area by local observers. Camillus Valley, the two and a half mile stretch along Nine Mile Creek valley south of Camillus in Onondaga County, and Selkirk Shores State Park near Pulaski in Oswego County have become locally famous as sites where "southern" warbler species may be seen regularly, even with a fair degree of certainty, granted June and a good ear. Consequently, these areas each spring and early summer produce a wealth of data out of all proportion to their geographical size. Yet the concentration of birders in such areas and the attendant wealth of data are not to be decried, for such concentration has led to a maximum of nest observations there, and the observations of species' characteristics and particularly of song have been responsible for the discovery of other local sites of the warblers in question.

Of interest but little overall significance are migrational reports of the species in question. Certainly at the northern fringe of their range, individuals seen in spring migration may just as well be migrational strays as individuals on the way to specific local breeding sites. However, in fall migration, particularly if young or immature birds are seen, one may well speculate as to the area of their origin, (c. f. Hooded Warbler).

The data to follow attempts to give a ten year synopsis of the available material on the species in question. Some species follow a neat geographical distribution (why?), others a specific plant distribution (see Pine and Cerulean Warblers), others a mixture of these two forms of distribution. The majority show an accumulation of records and some confusion attendant thereon.

As to patterns of future distribution and/or spread of these "southerners" one can only project further those trends and advances that have developed over the past ten years. One could bemoan the lack of earlier data (e. g. 1930-1940 or 1940-1950), and would wish for a greater detail and extent of observations from older reports (see Bibliography), but such stone-throwing is certainly unbecoming and mildly hypocritical in all who bird much but publish little, present company included.

PHOTHONOTARY WARBLER (*Protonotaria citrea*). On August 6, 1944 an adult male was seen feeding a young bird well able to fly in the Short Point Bay area of the south shore of Oneida Lake. The occurrence was duly noted, carefully filed, and forgotten. It was not until late May 1953 that, on the basis of this one record, a foray into the area disclosed at least one pair of birds present. The first report in 1954 was *five* seen on May 13, and on May 22 of that year a nest (with three eggs) was found in a low, rotted willow stump (Minor). In 1955 five singing males were located

in this area and a second nest was located. In 1956 nest-building was observed on May 23.

The first migrational record occurred when a single male was seen May 18, 1957 at Green Lakes State Park (B. Peterson), this at a time when the usual three to five males had established singing posts around the periphery of Short Point Bay. The same year, a new location, the first extension in five years, was noted, complete with nest and two successfully fledged young, June 5 to July 10, at Muskrat Bay, Oneida Lake, about two miles west of the formerly restricted colony. In 1958, the first bird, a singing male, was seen there on May 7, a record arrival date. And on June 1 a female was seen nest-building in a three-foot stump in a new sector of the swamp.

Since the discovery of this species at Short Point Bay in 1944, the area has changed considerably. In 1944 there were on the edge of the bay just two camps, reached by boat or a very muddy footpath. Starting in 1953 a dirt road was inched around the bay, and this has by yearly improvements been expanded to a two-lane dirt road and the bay has become rimmed with camps and some year-round houses. This road is flooded over each spring by the rise of Oneida Lake; the red maple swamp about the periphery of the bay correspondingly floods. However, when the flood waters recede, the water is held in the swamp to dwindle gradually through the late spring and early summer. This flooding has not particularly changed the character of the red maple swamp, but will probably do so, as the trees are much more susceptible to blow-down in this permanently soft bottom. Those trees that have succumbed to wind action provide many tangles for the Prothonotaries to feed about and have allowed a very small growth of young willow (mostly along the road), swamp dogwood, and buttonbush to grow up. However, the extensive area of buttonbush found in and around the Prothonotary colony in the Oak Orchard Creek near Batavia is not present here; similarly it might be noted that the Prothonotary colony at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, Seneca Falls, has a very restricted amount of buttonbush and consists largely of a mixed red maple - elm swamp.

Other areas in Central New York (limited definition) may support colonies of Prothonotaries. Peter Scott swamp, northeast of Phoenix, Oswego County, has extensive red maple swamps with almost constant flood conditions (it is actually a huge backwater of the Oneida River) and has large areas of buttonbush and dead trees intermingled. However, this area would be accessible only to a well-provisioned muskrat with a waterproof compass or to someone canoe-rich and wisdom-poor. A similar area exists around the western, northern and eastern edges of Howland's Island Game Management Area near Port Byron, Cayuga County. Though this area could be reached by land, it would probably best be covered by boat or canoe.

Neither Hyde nor Spiker gives any reference to the Prothonotary in their various summer studies in Central New York. Stoner, however, found a pair in June (2nd and 7th) 1928 in the willows along Chittenango Creek north of Bridgeport. Intermittent checks there over the last ten years have failed to disclose any sign of the species' presence, and the area has become most unsuitable through the channel dredging for boat docking over the past eight years.

GOLDEN-WINGER WARBLER (*Vermivora chrysoptera*). Probably the most rapidly spreading "southern" warbler now present in Central New

York. Spiker briefly mentions them as present in the Potter Swamp area (1929-1931). Hyde gives only one record for two summers' work (1935-1936), this a probable migrant near Rochester. Stoner mentions a single male June 11 and 28, 1928, in the Chittenango Creek area as was the Prothonotary, and a much more significant record on June 20, 1928 on the north shore of Oneida Lake near Cleveland. How long this rare status persisted is hard to determine. There are three or four late May records of migrant birds from 1943-1950 from Oakwood cemetery at Syracuse, but no suggestion of breeding birds.

On May 18, 1951 four singing males were discovered in the brushy fringes of the bottom-lands of Camillus Valley by F. Scheider and Wilson Schramm. In 1952 two males were again seen there, and at this time the Onondaga Audubon Society, now alerted to their possibility, found four singing males at Three Rivers Game Management Area near Baldwinsville. Note that the numbers in these cases can be counted on a single hand.

In 1953 up to ten singing males were located in Camillus Valley and seven or eight in the Three Rivers GMA. In the spring of 1954 five new stations were located, three in northwestern Onondaga County (Beaver Lake, Lysander, West Phoenix) and two in southeastern Oswego County (Big Bay Area, Constantia). The last site was definitely a new station, as the area had been birded regularly for the previous eight years by the writer, and Golden-wings had never been observed there. Most surprising was a singing male found on June 20 at the periphery of an alder bog in eastern Oswego County, north of Williamstown. This station is on the southern edge of the Tug Hill Plateau country, a remarkable extension of range (if it was that; cf. Stoner's earlier record).

In 1955 the Camillus Valley sector seemed to reach saturation level with eight to nine pairs established. (Three years of exploration was to show this estimate only one-third correct). Two more stations were located in early June 1955, the most significant in Rock Cut Valley, Onondaga County, the first reported southeast of Syracuse and the first breeding station south of Oneida Lake and east of Route 11. In the spring of 1956 it was first reported established at Selkirk Shores State Park, definitely a new area, for this particular park had been vigorously birded by Mrs. E. Evans for the previous five years. And in May, a single male was first seen at Oneida, Oneida County. At least three different stations were located in the Plainville area, Onondaga County (M. Bitz).

By 1957 the species had become accepted as a regular and dependable breeder, though still quite uncommon, and new sites at Otter Lake, Cayuga County, and at Pleasant Valley, near Marcellus, Onondaga County, were no surprise. Quite surprising, however, was a pair established in a patch of pine-oak barrens between Phoenix and Caughdenoy, Oswego County. All previous sites had been predictably the same — slightly wet areas with a scattered growth of red maple, ash, pin cherry or aspen saplings, with adjacent wet brush and drier alder and higher stands of maple, elm, ash, and cherry, and some large standing dead trees for singing posts. 1958 produced only two new sites, both along the Oneida River near Euclid, Onondaga County, but scattered reports of singing males along Onondaga Creek south of Syracuse and near Tully, Onondaga County, were made too.

Two points need yet to be made about the explosive spread of this species.

To date, no indications, not even persistently singing males, have been found around the periphery of Cicero Bog or, for that matter, any place in the flat lands along the south shore of Oneida Lake. The areas around Rome and Oneida have yet to see breeding Golden-wings, and the Rome Pine Plains, an excellent hodgepodge of wet brush and dry pine flats, through the past three years has been a complete blank for them.

On September 9, 1956, a single male Golden-winged was seen at Bridgeport; on August 17, 1958, six Golden-winged Warblers were seen migrating down the Sandy Pond dunes and through the outer woods at Selkirk Shores State Park; again a single male was seen there August 30, 1958, moving with a flock of Bay-breasted, Wilson's, and Tennessee Warblers and Redstarts. All these observations give cause for considerable speculation for, to date, no known colonies are present north of Selkirk Shores State Park, yet birds which could be suspected of migrating are seen each fall. These observations raise the question on whether there are breeding stations north of the known sites. And, if so, where? Of interest in this regard is a report of Golden-winged, Blue-winged, and Brewster's Warblers seen May 25, 1956, near Watertown by J. and A. Blake (Kingbird vol. V, No. 2, p. 65).

BLUE-WINGED WARBLER (*Vermivora pinus*) and **BREWSTER'S WARBLER** (*Vermivora leucobronchialis*). On May 17, 1953 a singing male Blue-winged was observed in the west gulf of Camillus Valley; it was seen repeatedly through the last spring and early summer there, without evidence of breeding (numerous observers). On May 9, 1954 a singing male was again seen there and intermittently through the late spring; a second male was seen two miles further north in the main valley in early June. As in 1953, no evidence of breeding was detected. On May 8, 1955, a singing male was again observed in the same area and later in the season was observed courting a female Golden-winged. In May 1956 a singing male Blue-winged was again located and a singing male Brewster's was also located in the same area. However, in May 1957 no Blue-winged Warbler was noted but four Brewster's Warblers were noted along the main valley and in the west gulf in one day (May 12). However, a male Blue-winged was reported near Oneida Castle May 4, 1957. N.b: The previous spring had seen the first Golden-winged Warbler record for the latter area.

In May 1958 no Blue-winged Warblers and only a single male Brewster's was located at Camillus.

On August 5, 1957 a group of four Blue-winged Warblers was seen near Otter Lake by D. Whitman; this and the presence of Brewster's Warblers are the strongest breeding evidences to date of the Blue-winged Warbler for the area.

Presently the Blue-winged is at best a very rare and frankly erratic breeder, but the expanding Golden-winged colonies mentioned heretofore should be regularly checked to see if Blue-winged Warblers eventually move in (e. g. the Taylor Hollow situation near Buffalo, Region I).

CERULEAN WARBLER (*Dendroica cerulea*). This warbler usually arrives about the fifth or sixth of May and in favored areas can be a fairly common breeding bird. The breeding stations presently known read like a west-to-east chain from Howland's Island GMA, Cross Lake, south through Camillus Valley, Marcellus, Pleasant Valley South Onondaga, and east to Cicero Bog, Bridgeport, and Stockbridge Valley south of Oneida. North of

the immediate Seneca River drainage and the south shore of Oneida Lake it is an extremely rare bird, and I know of just one record for the north shore of Oneida Lake in 15 years of observation. It has been noted in late spring at Tully Lakes, Onondaga County, and Selkirk Shores State Park, Oswego County, but is not known to breed in any of these places.

Of major interest regarding this species is the rapidly spreading Dutch Elm disease and Elm Bark Beetle, for these elm pests are likely to create a rapid and nearly complete loss of this species' major habitat requirement — stands of tall open trees near sluggish water courses, a requirement almost universally fulfilled by the elms of the area. The fact that this is the preferred habitat is evidenced by the location of only one breeding station away from such habitat, said station located in a stand of magnificent red oaks on the east side of Cross Lake.

Sample singing male counts should be taken yearly, as this is a readily counted species (singing males can be heard 1/5th of a mile or more) and its status is likely to change as rapidly as the decrease and eventual loss of elm trees progresses.

High count to date is 41 singing males May 25, 1953, Camillus Valley, but for the last three years the high counts there have ranged 15-20 individuals. It will be particularly interesting to see if the species remains of its major habitat tree species is significantly reduced or wiped out, and, if the bird remains, what will be the secondary tree-species chosen. The situation seems currently quite comparable to the loss of the American Chestnut and its effect on breeding bird populations five decades ago.

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT (*Icteria virens*). This bird has virtually no migratory history in the area. Records are basically breeding records and, with one exception, a singing bird July 4, 1957, Howland's Island, GMA, are confined to the Camillus Valley - Marcellus - Otisco Lake axis. For ten years the bird was known to occur sporadically (one bird per two to three years) but not known to breed in the area despite the numerous protestations of bird manuals, field guides, and local and state texts. In May 1956 a single singing bird was located in a wet brushy swamp in the west gulf of Camillus Valley; there was no evidence that it bred.

In June 1957 two nests were discovered; the first was a nest with five young located in a heavy patch of dry brush June 23, on the east side of Camillus Valley; a second nest was discovered in late June on the west side of Nine Mile Creek valley just north of Marietta, Onondaga County. In 1958 three different singing males were located about Camillus Valley, and one nest with four fledged young nearby (June 22) was located.

One cannot help asking whether the linear distribution (parallel to the outlet of Otisco Lake) of this species prevails on the dry, brushy hillsides above outflow streams from Skaneateles Lake, Jamesville Reservoir, and Cazenovia Lake. Future summers with further exploration should confirm or deny this speculation.

HOODED WARBLER (*Wilsonia citrina*). Stoner reported a single male and a pair at Constantia and Panther Lake respectively in 1929. To the best of my knowledge, the bird has not been observed again on the north shore of Oneida Lake, and its present distribution peculiarly and neatly avoids that sector. Hyde mentions that this species occurs as a breeder in lakeside woods from Irondequoit Bay to little Sodus Bay. The present num-

ber of located pairs of this species in the area approximates a dozen, all confined to three very distinct areas. Five pairs are located south of Camillus and east of Marcellus. Three pairs are located east of Fayetteville and in Green Lakes State Park. And four pairs are known from the Mexico-Selkirk Shores State Park area. In every case the birds are found in well-drained open maple woods with a thick but not impenetrable undergrowth of sapling maples. The constancy of this habitat choice has led to the finding of breeding stations by locating hillsides with such wooded cover about the periphery of a single known breeding pair's territory. Probably regular summer checking will produce more stations, but the apparent specificity of habitat will cause some losses (e. g. one pair at Selkirk Shores State Park lost to a new parking lot and a second pair there has moved because of loss of understory saplings by shading).

In 1958 Dr. Spofford located two active nests, one with two eggs (and two Cowbird eggs) June 15 at Selkirk Shores State Park, and a second with one egg and three Cowbird eggs June 29 south of Onondaga Hill.

There are two fall migrant records, both of adult males, along the Sandy Pond dunes. As in the case of the Golden-winged Warblers seen there, one wonders, whence their origin? Are there breeding stations to the north of that area?

PINE WARBLER (*Dendroica pinus*). Though not a strictly southern warbler, this species has the "confinement" of some of the previously considered species. One to two pairs are regularly found in a small grove of huge white pines just south of the Salmon River in Selkirk Shores State Park. And since June 1954, at least one and up to three singing male Pine Warblers have been found in the pine oak scrub of the Rome Pine Plains between Sylvan Beach and Rome, Oneida County. The latter area will probably be productive of more individuals if regularly worked, but the recent invasion of roads and permanent homes in the area makes one wonder how long this locally unique area of pitch, white, and red pine will persist.

Rare Southern Warblers

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Dendroica discolor*). Prior to 1954 one to two Prairie Warblers per year were seen in migration at Selkirk Shores State Park, but since then the bird has become an unknown in the area. A single bird was carefully studied on the late date of September 27, 1958 at Selkirk Shores State Park. It is suspected that all of these lakeshore individuals, both spring and fall, come from the small colony of Prairie Warblers located some 35 miles north of Kingston, Ontario.

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (*Dendroica dominica*). At present a single local record, that of a singing male, April 30, 1954 at Syracuse (Schreider). This bird allowed such a close approach that the observer was able to determine the presence of complete white eye-lines bilaterally, and the suspicion that this was the Mississippi Valley subspecies "albiflora" is high. Eaton, *Birds of New York*, vol. II, 1909. *Bibliography: Part I* Hyde, A. Sidney, *Roosevelt Wildlife Bulletin*, vol. VII #2, 1939. Stoner, Dayton, *Roosevelt Wildlife Annals*, vol. 11 #3 & 4. Spiker, Charles J., *Roosevelt Wildlife Bulletin*, vol. IV #1, 1931, and vol. VIII #1, 1935.

Kingbird, vol. IV #2 & 3, 1954; vol. V #2 & 3, 1955; vol. VI #2 & 3, 1956; vol. VII #2 & 3, 1957; vol. VIII #2 & 3, 1958.

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