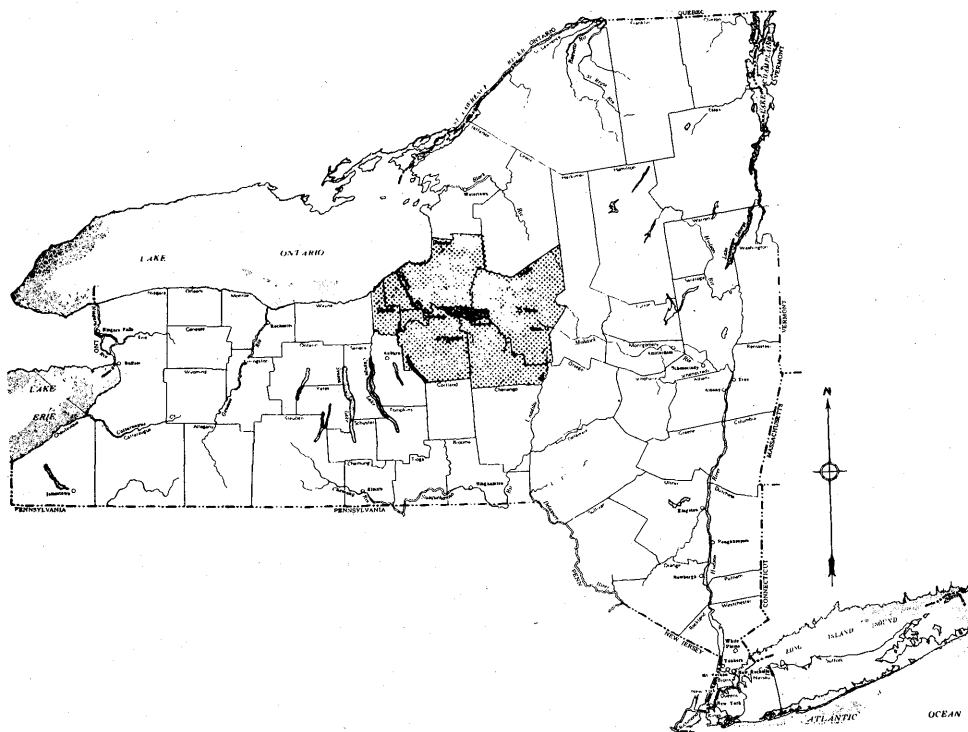


# SOUTHERN WARBLERS IN CENTRAL NEW YORK: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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In a recent paper, Dr. Fritz Scheider (1959) has discussed the distribution of certain southern warblers in a portion of central New York. Scheider's data are mostly recent, and mostly concerned with areas covered regularly by Syracuse birders. The present paper is an attempt to gather and interpret data from many older sources which will supplement and explain the present distribution to some degree, and which will at any rate give a more detailed picture of the distribution and abundance of these birds.



**Figure 1 — The shaded area represents Central New York as used by Scheider (1958) and adopted for this paper.**

The term, "central New York", as Scheider pointed out, is meaningless unless defined. For the purposes of this paper, we will adopt the boundaries indicated by Scheider (see Fig. 1), although it will be necessary to go outside of this area for data which will give historical background and perspective.

Data for this paper were drawn largely from the papers listed below, many of which are difficult to secure and unfamiliar to most present-day ornithologists. Additional records were taken from the field notes of Ernest G. Tabor of Meridian and Verdi Burtch of Branchport. I am grateful to Dr. Edgar M. Reilly and the New York State Museum and Science Service for permitting the use of Mr. Burtch's notes, and to Eugene Eisenmann and Alexander Wetmore for supplying me with data from the paper by Willard (1877).

Fortunately for the student of bird distribution, central New York has long been a favorite study area for ornithologists, both professional and amateur. Early observations were made by Audubon, John Bartram, and Governor DeWitt Clinton, and the pioneer work of James DeKay summarized what was known about New York birds up to 1840. The first serious and comprehensive lists of birds from Central New York began to appear in the 1870's. Local lists of this period appeared in the old "Forest and Stream", in small pamphlets, in obscure journals like "The Ornithologist and Oologist", and even in local newspapers. This was the heyday of the collector, particularly of the egg collector, and as a result these early workers knew the breeding birds of their area thoroughly and were always on the alert for rarities. Many of them were skilled field ornithologists when Coues' Key was the only available bird guide. Since their records were based for the most part on specimens and on nests which they collected, their statements as to the presence of a particular species are quite trustworthy. Negative statements are less acceptable, because the observers were few and scattered, but the zeal of these collectors and their interest in the unusual lend credence to their reports.

When E. H. Eaton wrote his monumental "Birds of New York", in 1909-1914, it was to these observers that he went for information. In the counties with which we are concerned he had 25 informants (Eaton, 1909): 7 from Cayuga county, 4 from Onondaga county, 9 from Oneida county, 5 from Oswego county; and the thoroughness of Eaton's coverage is a tribute to the work of these early workers. The following species accounts make use of the work, published and unpublished, of these men, as well as my own observations over a period of 20 years in northern Cayuga county. Though they may not explain why these species occur where they do, they will do a good deal to elucidate where they occur, and will also indicate to some extent when they appeared and how they have spread.

**PROTHONOTARY WARBLER:** Although the earliest students did not report this species in Central New York, it was present in western New York (Bergtold, 1899, Eaton, 1901), probably as a rare breeding bird. The first Central New York nest was taken in the Montezuma swamp in 1948 (Parkes, 1952) although there are several earlier sight records from several areas. Had it occurred in this area earlier, it seems likely that such skilled and energetic observers as Foster Parker and E. G. Tabor would have found it. Evidence thus indicates that it entered our area as a breeding bird

during the 1940's, and during the 1950's has been extending its range eastward and increasing in numbers.

**BLUE-WINGED WARBLER:** As with the Prothonotary, this species was rarely recorded by early observers, and then usually as a migrant. Eaton (1914) records it as breeding in Niagara county, but in our area it was certainly absent. In a lifetime of birding, Tabor (unpublished manuscript) reported that he had seen only one bird of this species in northern Cayuga county, and most local lists do not list it at all. Recent occurrences listed by Scheider seem to indicate that it is now becoming established in Central New York, but this is a very recent development.

**GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER:** Scheider indicates that this species was rare in Central New York until quite recently, and that there has been an explosive spread within the past ten years. That their range has been extended in this period seems certain, but there has been an equally explosive growth of bird-watchers in this area. The history of the Golden-wing in the area is not hard to trace. It was evidently very rare prior to 1900. Both Short (1896) and Langille (1884) listed it as a breeding bird in western New York, but Rathbun (1879) had no records except two from Yates county. Barnum (1886) had collected one specimen at Onondaga Valley in 1879, but considered it accidental. Embury (1901) did not list it from Madison county, and Ralph and Bagg (1886) likewise had not recorded it in Oneida county. The earliest records from northern Cayuga county are given by Reed and Wright (1909) for the years 1883 and 1898. Tabor collected its nest in the township of Ira, Cayuga county, in 1902, and regularly recorded it thereafter. My own observations of the species began in 1940, and I have found it common throughout northern Cayuga county. Its abundance compares with that of the Indigo Bunting, with which it is ecologically associated. I know of at least a dozen localities for the species in the town of Ira, and many more in surrounding townships. Quite probably its recent discovery to the east of this area, as reported by Scheider, does represent a real increase in range or abundance, or both. But in the northern parts of Cayuga county, and in the extreme southwestern part of Oswego county and northwestern Onondaga county, it has been common for many years.

**CERULEAN WARBLER:** This species appears to have been present from the earliest recorded times. Willard (1877) found it local and not common, while Rathbun (1879) thought it was not uncommon. This is probably a case of using different words with the same meaning. It may be locally common, as Scheider indicated, but in the area as a whole it is not common. Rathbun also stated that this species was rarely seen prior to 1876, and it may be that an eastern movement occurred in the latter part of the last century. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that Ralph and Bagg (1886) did not report it from Oneida county, while Eaton (1909) listed it as a local summer resident in that county.

It seems likely that there has been a southerly as well as an easterly movement in recent years. Reed and Wright (1909) did not list it except at the extreme north end of the Cayuga Lake basin. It now occurs as far north as Sherwood, in Cayuga county, and along both sides of Owasco Lake near the north end.



**Figure 2 — Cerulean Warbler on nest — June 15, 1915. Photo by Verdi Burtch — Courtesy of N. Y. S. Museum and Science Service.**

**HOODED WARBLER:** The Hooded Warbler has been common in the lake-shore areas of Cayuga and Wayne counties from the earliest reports to the present. To the east and south, it seems to have fallen off sharply until recent times. Eaton (1909) called it common in Cayuga county, occasional in Onondaga and Oswego counties, rare in Oneida county, and, surprisingly, locally common in Madison county. It now occurs as far south as Owasco in Cayuga county, and several pairs may be found in almost any sizeable woodlot in Ira, Cato, Victory and Conquest in northern Cayuga county. In this area there has been no marked change in abundance, but it appears that it is now becoming more common in suitable areas to the east.

**YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT:** The chat has always been a rare and local species in Central New York, although there seems to have been a dramatic increase in south-central New York in the early 1900's. It is now a regular summer resident, and indeed locally common, at the south end of the Cayuga Lake basin, but seeing a chat at the north end of the basin is a

rare event. The species has apparently been unable to establish a stable breeding population in this region despite the thousands of acres of abandoned farmland which appear to provide desirable habitat.

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\* This is an obvious typographical error, since the paper is entirely concerned with central New York, and southern New York is not mentioned in the paper. However, the title as printed must be used in referring to the paper.