

WILSON'S WARBLER NESTS IN NEW YORK STATE

DAN NICKERSON

On Friday, June 30, 1978, while birding in the North Meadow, situated just off the Adirondak Loj Road in the town of North Elba, Essex Co., I located and photographed a male and a female Wilson's Warbler. On Saturday, August 1, I returned to the same area and after a one-hour search, I found a nest and three eggs of a Wilson's Warbler. This is the first report of a nest of this species in New York State.

Bent (1963, *Life Histories of North American Wood Warblers*, *Bull. U.S.N.M.* 203, p. 635), describes the Wilson's Warbler as nesting in eastern North America in the southern provinces of Canada and in the states of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. According to



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Bull (1974 *Birds of New York State*, p. 518) "... no summering—let alone breeding—has been substantiated in New York to date." Both Carleton (1976. *Birds of Essex County*,) and Beehler (1978, *Birdlife of the Adirondack Park*) describe the Wilson's Warbler as a migrant species with a late spring date of June 6 (Carleton).

The favored breeding habitat of the Wilson's Warbler is described by various authors as areas of brushy bogs, swamp borders, alder swales and alder-covered hillsides. It is associated with such northern flora and fauna as sphagnum moss, balsam fir, black spruce and Palm and Tennessee Warblers.

There are at least three reports of summer sightings of Wilson's Warbler in New York State. Two were reported by Alice Jones and Helen Manson—one on June 28, 1972, on the Wilmington Road in North Elba, and another in Newcomb, also in Essex Co., on June 30, 1977. Another sighting was made by Gordon Meade on June 28, 1977, near the bridge over the St. Regis River on the road into Madawaska, Franklin Co. All of these sightings were of singing males; two of them near water bordered by alders.

The North Meadow is an area of overgrown pasture, partially flooded by beaver activity, located on the Adirondack Loj road a few miles from the Village of Lake Placid in the town of North Elba. It is located at the base of the High Peaks of the Adirondacks. From North Meadow several peaks over four thousand feet in elevation can be seen. The elevation of North Meadow is approximately 1900 feet. This area was studied by the ornithologist Aretas Saunders in the summers of 1925 and 1926 while he was a visitor at Wood Farm on the Loj Road. Wood Farm included the area known as North Meadow. Saunders describes the vegetation and birdlife of this area in the 1929 volume of the *Roosevelt Wildlife Bulletin*.

In the area of the Wilson's Warbler nest, the most conspicuous ground cover is meadowsweet or Spiraea. Spiraea grows to a height of one to five feet in clearings between white and red spruce, tamarack and balsam fir, which grow at an average height of fifteen to thirty feet with a maximum diameter at breast height of about eight inches. These evergreens are spaced sometimes in clumps of a half dozen trees; sometimes they occur singly. Broad open patches of Spiraea occur between the evergreens. Quaking aspen, fire cherry, white pine, alders and willows also occur here. Ground covers include blueberry, goldenrod, strawberry, grasses, sedges, mosses and hawkweed. This area was formerly used as pasture which may account

for the present spacing of evergreens.

The area in which the nest was found slopes gently to a beaver-flooded marsh which Saunders described as a "swampy meadow with trout brooks." The beaver activity and subsequent flooding have occurred since Saunder's time. Evergreens, willow and alder form a dense marsh border.



*Wilson's Warbler Nest and Eggs—North Elba, Essex Co.
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On the days that the Wilson's Warblers were observed, Ring-billed Gulls, Green Herons, Blue-winged Teals, Common Snipe and Swamp Sparrows were also seen on the marsh. On the pasture above the marsh, Song Sparrows, Yellow-rumped, Magnolia and Blackburnian Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, American Redstarts, Common Yellowthroats, Purple Finches, White-throated Sparrows, American Goldfinches, Gray Catbirds, and Cedar Waxwings were noted and were probably breeding. Rather uncommon species (even for the Adirondacks) such as Rusty Blackbird, Lincoln's Sparrow and Ruby-crowned

Kinglet were also sighted. Of these species only Lincoln's Sparrow was found by Saunders. Ruby-crowned Kinglets undoubtedly nest here. Several singing males were heard and in 1976 a nest was found by the author at Adirondak Loj only a few miles away.

The first Wilson's Warbler was observed at North Meadow at about 8 a.m., about six feet from the ground in a deciduous shrub next to a balsam fir in a generally open area of the abandoned pasture perhaps thirty yards from the marsh border. It was observed with the naked eye and through the view-finder of a SLR camera with a 300-mm lens. The yellow color and black cap were observed and the bird was photographed. The photographs show it to be a male Wilson's Warbler.

This bird crossed part of the clearing to an alder clump and then disappeared into a dense stand of alders bordering the marsh. Two songs were heard which were poorly documented by the author and remembered as having consisted of two or more accented *chip* notes followed by a descending series of run-together notes descending in both pitch and volume. The bird was not seen uttering these notes. No male Wilson's Warbler was observed or heard at any other time thereafter.

A few moments later another bird was observed at a height of about six to ten feet in a balsam fir. This bird was observed at greater length and was identified as a female Wilson's Warbler by the brownish color of the wings and back and by the presence of a distinct dark cap. This bird was observed for a half-hour or more through 7 x 35 binoculars, feeding in the branches of willows and firs at a height of approximately three to fifteen feet. It was watched carefully for any carrying of food in the bill or other evidences of visits to a nest. Because of the density of the cover it was sometimes out of sight for several seconds.

For most of the next fifteen to thirty minutes the bird flitted among the branches of one particular willow and one particular fir. It continued feeding but at one time began uttering soft *chet* notes, similar to, but softer than, those of a Common Yellowthroat, as it flitted among the lower branches of the willow. The presence of a nest in this area was suspected although the presence of chicks seemed unlikely, as the bird was not seen carrying food or fecal sacs in her bill.

After perhaps a total of forty-five minutes of observation, the bird disappeared. The lower branches of the fir and willow and the

ground nearby were checked in vain for a nest. A wait of five or ten minutes produced no bird and I left.

The next morning at about seven a.m. the female was again found in the same area. Again as she approached the lower branches of the willow she uttered the soft *chet* calls. Soon she disappeared and the author approached again to check the area for a nest. The female Wilson's Warbler flushed from a point behind the author about eight feet from the base of the fir. A quick search revealed no nest. The author withdrew to a greater distance and this time watched the female make several false starts into the clearing away from the willow. Her progress was followed only by the movement of the low dense Spiraea. After a few moments she again disappeared. Again the area was approached and again the bird flushed from behind the author. This time a nest was located about three feet from the author's feet beneath a hummock of moss, about six feet from the overhanging branches of the willow and twelve feet from the base of the fir.

The nest was made mostly of grass and held three eggs. Each egg was creamy pink in color with reddish-brown speckles. These were densely concentrated toward the blunt end of the egg and more



*Wilson's Warbler Egg—North Elba, Essex Co.
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lightly dispersed over the rest of the egg. A slug was on one of the eggs. The slug was removed.

The next day the author returned to the nest site with John M. C. Peterson. The bird flushed when we attempted to photograph it on the nest from a distance of four feet. One egg lay about a foot from the nest. It was photographed and returned to the nest. The bird was observed for several minutes and Peterson confirmed the identification of the bird. Again the bird disappeared, but after a short time it was again flushed from the nest; it evidently approaches the nest fairly secretively.

To summarize, a nest and three eggs of a Wilson's Warbler were located in the North Meadow in North Elba, Essex Co., on August 1, 1978. This is the first recorded nesting of this species in New York State.

The area in which the nest was found was studied by the ornithologist Aretas Saunders in 1925 and 1926. He did not find the Wilson's Warbler here. Ruby-crowned Kinglets probably nest here; these also were apparently absent in Saunders' time. Rusty Blackbird is also a possible recent resident of the area. This leads to speculation that some of these northern species may be becoming more numerous in the Adirondacks. On the other hand, changes in physiography due to beaver activity and successional changes in the vegetation since the abandonment of the North Meadow as a pasture make it difficult to draw any conclusions in this specific instance. The several recent summer reports of Wilson's Warbler may indicate that this species is extending its range southward. Surely this bird should be watched for and the bird's presence in our area monitored.

R R No. 3, Box 341, Freeport, Maine 04032