



Habitat of nesting Palm Warblers, Franklin Co.

6 July 1983

J. M. C. Peterson

FIRST RECORD OF PALM WARBLER NESTING IN NEW YORK STATE

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On the morning of Thursday, 23 June 1983, during the course of field work on the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas, Timothy Stiles encountered a singing male Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum*), accompanied by a female, on a large bog in the Town of Waverly, Franklin County, within the boundaries of the Adirondack Park. I visited the bog on Wednesday, 6 July, with Stiles and Daniel Nickerson and, after a one-hour search, we located the birds and found a nearly completed nest still under construction. Stiles returned two days later, on 8 July, finding the nest finished and completely feather-lined, containing a single egg.

On 24 August, Elsbeth Johnson and I collected the used nest, which is now in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History. This provides a first nesting record for New York State of the "Yellow" Palm Warbler (*D. p. hypochrysea*).



Used nest of (Yellow) Palm Warblers, Franklin Co.

24 August 1983

E. S. Johnson

Two distinct subspecies of the Palm Warbler are recognized and they are often separable in the field. The nominate "Western" Palm Warbler (*D. p. palmarum*) breeds from Mackenzie and Manitoba east to Ontario and Michigan. The much brighter *hypochrysea*, or "Yellow" Palm, nests from Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland south to New Hampshire (Center Ossipee), Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. There is no firm evidence of its breeding in Vermont. An early May report was discarded by the recently completed Vermont Atlas as being a late migrant. Together, they are variously uncommon to abundant spring and fall migrants in New York State, uncommon in winter on the coast. Bull gives a late spring departure date of 27 May and early fall arrival of 26 August. Within the Adirondack Park, Carleton notes extremes for *hypochrysea* in Essex County of 4 May at Ironville and 3 September at Wadhams. The Palm Warbler has evidently never before been recorded in the state during June or July.

The nesting bog is approximately 4½ miles west of Bay Pond, on a large (> 20,000 acre) private estate, and is drained by Black Brook, which soon enters the nearby West Branch, St. Regis River near Auger-hole Falls. Approximate elevation of the bog, known locally as the "big swamp," is 1500 feet. To avoid confusion with a similar, but smaller, "Black Brook Bog" some 10 km. to the south, near Kildare, in the Town of Altamont, the Palm Warbler site is generally known as "Bay Pond Bog" by researchers. Even by Adirondack standards, this is a large bog, covering about 360 acres, and part of an 850 acre wetland complex. This appears to be a mineral-fed bog, with the bog mat lower at the center than around the edges, so that it receives ground water from springs, streams, or runoff. The bog mat is largely mounded or hummocky, dominated by a mixture of sphagnum, low shrubs and scattered small conifers and sedges, with portions of flat, open mat. *Spagnum rubellum*, *S. fuscum*, and *S. magellanicum* are the commonest species. Shrubs include Leatherleaf, Sheep Laurel, Wild Raisin, Spiraea, and blueberry, with cranberry, Bog Rosemary, and Bog Laurel present. Stunted Black Spruce and American Larch are densest near the edges. Sedges include cotton-grass, beak-rush, and various *Carex* species. The bog mat is bordered in places by dense shrub swamps of alder, flooded at the time of our June and July visits. Wooded Black Spruce-Larch swamps with a ground cover of sphagnum also surround the bog. Higher up, the slopes give way to northern hardwoods and mixed forest.

Although over 100 species have been recorded in the surrounding Atlas square, including 80 species in the block where the warblers were found, relatively few birds occupy the actual bog mat. Savannah Sparrows sing from territories in more open areas toward the center, while the stunted conifers nearer the edge provide cover for Lincoln's Spar-

rows, seen once carrying a fecal sac. A Hermit Thrush nest with eggs was found near that of the Palm Warblers, and during 1982 a hen Spruce Grouse with a brood of young was encountered by Timothy Barnett and Greenleaf Chase on the edge of the same bog, but in another Atlas block to the north. In the shrub swamps we located a fledgling Yellow-bellied Flycatcher begging for food and Ruby-crowned Kinglets feeding offspring, while a spruce-sphagnum "island" out in the bog had Gray Jays feeding young and family groups of Boreal Chickadees. Avian diversity was much greater in the surrounding forest above the bog.

The wonder of it is that Tim Stiles was on the bog at all; he deserves great credit not only for his discovery, but also for his perseverance and subsequent handling of the confirmation. This was his second "blockbusting" visit to the Adirondacks during June 1983. Permission to visit this large tract of private land had been obtained through the NYS Breeding Bird Atlas, and the landowners and caretaker had been most helpful in allowing Stiles and other qualified observers the opportunity to record the birds on the property.

Tim had spent the previous night camped above the West Branch, St. Regis near the Franklin-St. Lawrence county line. At daybreak he birded several miles along dirt roads through an extensive old burn and into a forest of mixed second-growth and mature woods until a fallen tree blocked further progress by car. Continuing on foot, he decided to strike off through the woods downhill, on a compass heading of 45°, to reach an area shown as the bog on his maps. He continued to press on, even when his progress was slowed by a seemingly unending stand of alder, growing in knee-deep, tannin-dark water where the wooded sphagnum swamp ended. Those who have bushwhacked in an Adirondack alder tangle on a muggy morning in black fly season can appreciate the effort it took to reach the relative freedom of the bog mat. Stiles worked his way along the edge, slogging slowly and carefully among the pitcher plants and low spruces.

It was midmorning when he heard the sweet trill, an unfamiliar song to him, and decided to investigate. He felt it was not a Yellow-rumped Warbler or Dark-eyed Junco, and certainly not a Chipping Sparrow, given the habitat. He knew it was a bird he had to see. In a few moments that decision led to the discovery of a small bird with streaked yellowish underparts and a chestnut cap: a Palm Warbler, evidently never before seen during summer in New York State. Even more exciting was the realization that there was a pair, flitting from spruce to spruce and tail-wagging. No further nesting evidence could be noted that day before Stiles had to return to his Brooklyn home.

On the cold, misty morning of 6 July, I was on the bog with Stiles

and Dan Nickerson, who had come down from his home in Maine to work on the Atlas. Nickerson and I had shared in Adirondack searches and discoveries of the first NYS nests of White-winged Crossbill in 1975 and Wilson's Warbler in 1978. Walking three abreast along the edge of the bog, we soon heard a trill and located the male, then spotted both birds together, the female diving down to the bog mat from a dead spruce pole and coming up with what might have been a feather. In a matter of moments it was clear that she was collecting and carrying feathers, taking them to a spot on the sphagnum screened by a dense clump of low spruces on one of the mounds. Waiting until both birds had left the area on a gathering trip, we moved in and found the nearly completed nest, made of grasses woven in a small cup around the woody stems of Labrador Tea and lined with a few feathers. After taking several photographs, we withdrew. Given the relatively late date, this was almost certainly a second nesting, and the pair may have already raised their first brood. But when would the female start laying her clutch?

As decided upon, Tim Stiles waited until late in the morning on 8 July to revisit the site, hoping that after two days she might have laid the first egg. He found the nest finished and completely feather-lined, containing a small creamy egg blotched with brownish markings. Thus, the Palm Warbler became the fourth new species confirmed as breeding in the state during the first four years of the Atlas project, joining Forster's Tern, the Boat-tailed Grackle, and the Blue Grosbeak.

Elsbeth Johnson and I were able to visit the bog on 24 August and collected the empty nest, attached to the supporting stems of Labrador Tea, also obtaining photos. While collecting the nest, we saw two Gray Jays and heard Boreal Chickadees, but did not see or hear Palm Warblers, or Lincoln's or Savannah Sparrows. At the caretaker's request, we marked a route to the nest site with survey tape which avoids the alder swamp. The nest has been deposited in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH 17922).

Bay Pond Bog is now part of a Boreal Heritage Reserve, comprising over 72,000 acres, formed by the Adirondack Conservancy through easement and ownership. The reserve is the largest, least-disturbed assemblage of boreal ecosystems in New York State, and quite possibly, within the eastern United States. This bog is at the southern limit of a peatland phenomenon that extends over a thousand miles northward to the southern edge of contiguous permafrost. Open expanses of peatland in the Northeast similar in size to that of Bay Pond Bog are restricted to Maine and possibly one site in central Pennsylvania. Only five peatlands east of the Great Lakes (including one other on the reserve, Spring Pond Bog) display similar natural features and rare communities.

This may be the single largest limiting factor for Palm Warbler in New York State—the lack elsewhere of large, undisturbed closed bog habitat.

In spite of the absence of previous breeding evidence within the Adirondacks, there is no reason to believe that this represents a southward range expansion, and it is entirely possible that an undiscovered relict population has been nesting on this, or even other bogs, for many years. Given the limited number of large heath-sedge-sphagnum bog mats in the state, all located in remote parts of the Adirondacks and most on private property rarely opened to birders, other records may be difficult to obtain, if indeed the birds occur elsewhere. Bogs are fragile and any visits should be limited to avoid undue impact. Those who have the opportunity to visit closed bogs should not be discouraged by the general shortage of avian species, but carefully search the edges and remain alert for rapid sweet trills among the scattered spruces. Other sites may in time be discovered.

In summary, a pair of "Yellow" Palm Warblers was encountered at the edge of a large boreal bog near Black Brook in Waverly, Franklin County, on 23 June 1983. The birds were completing a nest on 6 July, and on 8 July the nest contained the first egg. This represents the only known mid-summer occurrence and first confirmed record of nesting in New York State.

The author wishes to extend the thanks of all observers to Fred and William Rockefeller for the generous hospitality and encouraging cooperation that led to this and other notable discoveries regarding the avifauna near Bay Pond. Martin Roddy's patient guidance and helpful suggestions made each visit a memorable one. Thanks are also due to Robert Arbib and Dr. Gordon Meade for helping to arrange the initial permissions for Atlas observers to obtain coverage of Bay Pond Park. I also wish to acknowledge the help of High Peaks Audubon members Langdon Stevenson and Dr. Wesley Lanyon in seeing to the safe deposit of the nest in the AMNH collection. The generous support of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation toward "blockbusting" efforts in the Adirondack-Champlain region made our search possible. Both the NYS Breeding Bird Atlas and this regional coordinator owe a considerable debt of gratitude to my fellow bog sloggers Tim, Dan, and Elsbeth, who did everything they should during this enterprise, and then a little more.

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