

CERULEAN WARBLER AND NORTHERN PARULA TENDING THE SAME NEST

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A small isolated population of Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) has occupied a section of the Northwest Woods in East Hampton, Long Island, during the breeding season for the past several years (Lindsay and Vezo 1992, 1994). In 1992, season long observations suggested probable breeding of three pairs of these warblers, and in 1993, two pairs were confirmed breeding when they were seen feeding young. The birds have remained generally faithful to a few specific territories in this area, with the two main territories being a little over a quarter of a mile apart. The warblers were found again in 1994, with sightings of an individual male near the more northern territory recorded on 23, 28 and 29 May by multiple observers. Later both a male and a female were seen there.

In the territory to the south, one sighting of a male was recorded by Jim Ash around 28 May, but subsequent visits produced no sign of a bird in this area. A visit by Lindsay on 4 June produced no observations of Cerulean Warbler at either location, but, curiously, a male Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) sang throughout the day from the southernmost territory. On the morning of 10 June, the Northern Parula still present and singing at this site. Here the authors observed a female Cerulean Warbler carrying small caterpillars and other insects to a fairly exposed nest nearby. One very young chick was visible in the nest. The female visited it with food every few minutes for the next three hours. During this time, the Northern Parula also visited the nest twice with food, with a long interval between visits. The last visit resulted in an apparent skirmish with the female Cerulean Warbler, which chased and displayed aggressively toward the Northern Parula. At 11:00 AM the Cerulean Warbler stopped feeding the chick and began brooding the nest, with the Northern Parula still singing a short distance away.

On 14 June it was discovered that the nestling was a Brown-headed Cowbird chick; a second, much smaller chick now visible in the nest had the coloring and supercilium of a young Cerulean. On this brief visit only the female Cerulean Warbler was observed feeding the young. The Northern Parula continued to sing nearby. On 18 June the nest was empty, and on this and several later visits, there was no sign of either adult bird nor of any young in the area.

The nest resembled that of the Cerulean Warbler shown in Harrison (1975:188). It was placed in the fork of a vertical branch of an oak tree

about 25 feet high over an open area. The female, after depositing food at the nest, would pull in its wings and drop like a stone through the open area to the understory below. No male Cerulean or female Northern Parula was observed in the territory during the course of these observations.

Although there was almost no evidence to suggest hybridization of these species in this particular case, the possibility is intriguing. Sibley (1994) illustrates many unusual combinations that have been recorded, two involving Northern Parula and one involving Cerulean Warbler. Northern Parula X Yellow-throated Warbler (Sutton's Warbler) is cited as an example of occasional cross-breeding, and Northern Parula X American Redstart and Cerulean Warbler X Black-and-white Warbler are listed in a sampling of "bizarre and unique" pairings recorded only once or twice. The possibility of hybridization notwithstanding, it may be that the absence of the Cerulean Warbler's original mate or the absence of a female Northern Parula, or the presence of the cowbird chick triggered an innate response in the Northern Parula to bring food to the nest. The fact that the Northern Parula was still present so late in the breeding season is noteworthy in itself. Bull (1974:477-480) notes that, though once common breeders on eastern Long Island, the Northern Parula was considered extirpated by the early 1950s, probably as a result of the disappearance of its favored nesting material, the *Usnea* lichen, there.

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