

**AN UNUSUAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile species*)
BANDED AT BRADDOCK BAY, NY**

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Abstract

An unusual chickadee was captured and banded at the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory passerine banding station along the south shore of Lake Ontario in Monroe County during the fall 1999 migration. Measurements taken on this bird put it within the range of Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*), a species which has not been recorded in New York State. We discuss the measurements, appearance of the bird, and the possibilities that it represents.

Introduction

During the fall of 1999, an incredible movement of Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapilla*) was noted along the south shore of Lake Ontario by Braddock Bay Bird Observatory banders. On many days at the Kaiser-Manitou Beach passerine banding station near Braddock Bay, NY, the vast majority of birds captured were chickadees. During the entire fall period (15 September 1999 to 15 November 1999), 1,082 chickadees were netted and banded. This total eclipses the highest previous fall total of chickadees by more than a factor of two.

Discussion

On 16 Oct 1999, after twenty-four hours of southerly winds, three Braddock Bay Bird Observatory banders were netting large numbers of chickadees. One individual, trapped in the fifth hour after sunrise, was noted to have a very short wing chord (unflattened wing measurement from the shoulder to the tip of the longest primary). The measurement was low for Black-capped

Chickadee, and prompted a measurement of the bird's tail. The tail measurement was very short as well. In fact, the combination of the two measurements placed the bird clearly in the range for Carolina Chickadee, according to a scatter diagram in *Guide to Identification of North American Birds*, Vol. I, P. Pyle, 1997 (hereafter referred to as Pyle). This book is the accepted reference for banders, containing information on molt sequence, aging, specific and subspecific identification of passerines and "near" passerines of North America. The bird was carefully checked to determine if the low measurements were, perhaps, the result of molt or severe wear. All flight feathers were well- grown and fresh, thus neither wear nor active molt was in any way a factor in the measurements.

The bird was independently measured by all three banders, who reproduced within one- half millimeter the three original measurements: wing chord (59mm), tail (54mm) and exposed culmen— distance along the top of the upper mandible, from the edge of the feathers to the tip of the bill- (7.0 mm). According to Pyle, the tail and exposed culmen measurements were too low for Black-capped Chickadee. The wing chord measurement was on the absolute low end of the range for the species, and outside of the range for the race expected to occur in New York State.

Evaluation of the bird's plumage showed that when held side by side with a Black-capped Chickadee (of which numerous individuals were available for comparison!), the greater coverts of this unusual bird were edged with a dusky grayish, rather than pure white. The secondaries were edged in white, producing more contrast on the wing than was noted on the Black-capped Chickadees. The bottom edge of the black bib was very clean and straight; a feature normally observed on Carolina rather than Black-capped Chickadee. There were only two plumage features that appeared to be inconsistent with identification as Carolina Chickadee, these being the presence of white edging on the tail feathers, and a fairly buffy wash to the flanks. Regarding the latter feature, the subspecies of Carolina Chickadee(*P.c. extimus*) that ranges closest to New York State does show more buff in the flanks than any of the other subspecies (Pyle1997).

When the bird was released, a volunteer at the station followed the bird, in the hope that it would call during flight or perhaps land and vocalize. Unfortunately, this was not the case – the bird left silently, and did not alight in the first possible wooded area. It was lost to the observer shortly thereafter.

Although the wing, tail and exposed culmen measurements were quite low, and in fact well to the Carolina side of the separation line in Pyle, the wing-tail ratio was on the high side of the range for that species. Pyle notes that in the area of species range overlap, hybridization does occur between Carolina and Black-capped chickadees. A hybrid could be expected to be intermediate in size between the two species, and to show plumage characteristics of both species. This bird's plumage was closer to Carolina than Black-capped, except for the white edging on the tail feathers, although it is possible for Carolina to show such edging in extremely fresh plumage.

Summary

Although there are no records for Carolina Chickadee in New York State, the species does come tantalizingly close to the border in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey. There is also a specimen record of the Carolina Chickadee subspecies *extimus* for Ontario, Canada, from Long Point on the north shore of Lake Erie. (Parkes 1986)

In the field, the only method of identification that is considered reliable is vocalization. It is conceivable that the species has occurred in the state, but not been detected, due to the difficulty of field identification. Although we are not able to rule out the possibility of a hybrid or exceptionally small Black-capped Chickadee, photographs and descriptions of this bird are being submitted to NYSARC for review as a Carolina Chickadee.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Jessie Barry for volunteering her time at the banding station, and especially for following this chickadee on its release in the hopes that it would vocalize, and Willie D'Anna who reviewed a draft of this article and provided helpful comments.

Literature Cited

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