

NORTHERN PARULA RETURNS TO LONG ISLAND

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On 13 Jun 2000 , Eric Miller observed a Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) feeding young in Alley Pond Park, Queens County (Schiff S. and A. Wollin 2000). On 7 Jul 2001, Joseph Giunta and I observed a female Northern Parula feeding a nestling in the canopy of an oak tree at Fresh Pond, Hither Hills State Park, in Easthampton Town, Suffolk, Long Island. These records, plus a number of added reports of singing males on Long Island, suggest the long-awaited return of this species to a substantial part of its former range.

Early in the last century, the Northern Parula was regarded as a locally common species in a number of parts of New York State and the Northeast. In New York, it bred mostly in wetland areas in the Adirondacks and in the Long Island pine-and-oak barrens. It nested almost exclusively in *Usnea*, a hanging lichen known as "beard moss" or "old man's beard". In the South, so-called Spanish Moss (a name popularly used in our locale for *Usnea* as well) serves the same function. With the mysterious disappearance of *Usnea* from Long Island and other coastal areas of the Northeast in the early part of the last century (air pollution and a diminution in sea fog have been offered as explanations), the species vanished as a breeding bird over a wide area from southern New England to the mid-Atlantic states. Ironically, one of the last recorded breeding sites on Long Island was Hither Hills in 1938 (Cruickshank 1942; Bull 1964). In the 1940s and 1950s, there were only two "Confirmed" and one "Possible" nesting record and then nothing after that. This crash was by no means confined to New York as coastal populations in Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey similarly disappeared.

The presence of *Usnea* or Spanish Moss was long regarded as essential to parula nesting success and it has been evident that its return as a nester in our area was going to be dependent on either the return of the *Usnea*, or the historically recognized ability of the species to adapt to the use of other kinds of nesting substrates. That the latter could be the case was shown in the 1980s and 1990s, as the bird began to recolonize New Jersey, largely along the Delaware River in the northwestern part of the state, and also in swampy areas of the New Jersey Pine Barrens , the latter habitat being quite similar to its former Long Island home. The Delaware River birds often make their nests in the debris that forms in the crotches of the sycamore trees which are quite common on the river, and have been observed nesting as well in the drooping boughs of evergreens (Walsh et al. 1999).

In recent years there has been some indication that the Northern Parula might be attempting to return to Long Island, the best documented incident occurring in 1994 (Lindsay and Vezo 1995). A male No. Parula was seen in attendance at a Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) nest, visiting the nest with food, as well as heard singing nearby. However, there was no actual evidence to suggest

that hybridization had taken place, even though in my mind the possibilities were intriguing. Subsequently it became evident the nest contained a Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) chick and an apparent Cerulean Warbler fledgling.

In the spring of 2001, singing No. Parulas were noted at several eastern Long Island locations including the Little Peconic River near the Riverhead County Center, (where there are sycamores), Hunter's Gardens in the Manorville Hills between Eastport and Manorville, a persistent singing male in large old sycamores in Sebonac near North Sea, three singing males reported at Camp Hero, Montauk, another singing male at the Grace Estate, and a pair at Fresh Pond in the Hither Hills State, probably the same birds that succeeded in raising at least one chick. Other reports may turn up as Atlas 2000 information trickles in.

Do these breeding pairs and singing males represent a real return of a long-vanished breeding species or are they an artifact of increased coverage? I suspect that they represent a real and widespread return. Singing male Northern Parulas are hard to miss. The increased coverage during the last Atlas period in the early 1980s produced only two "Probables" and one "Possible" on Long Island in a six-year period suggesting that there was no comeback during that period. The current "explosion" of singing males with confirmed breeding in at least two cases, follows a typical pattern for the establishment or recolonization of breeding species. In the 1970's and 1980's the arrival of several southern woodland species on Long Island – Tufted Titmouse, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Red-bellied Woodpecker – was accomplished, not by a slow or gradual influx of breeding pairs, but by substantial invasions. Similarly, the Orchard Oriole, although in a slow process of recolonization on Long Island for a number of years, has increased most significantly as a breeder the last year or two in Nassau and Suffolk. If past colonizations of this sort are any indication, the No. Parula population may increase quickly and dramatically before leveling off. Since this coincides with Atlas 2000 we will likely have a good opportunity to document this new recolonization.

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