

**POSSIBLE HERMIT WARBLER (*Dendroica occidentalis*)
A FIRST FOR NEW YORK STATE, JONES BEACH SP,
NASSAU CO. , 11/28/02 TO 12/1/02.**

Andrew Block

37 Tanglewylde Avenue, Bronxville, New York 10708-3131

Anne Connor

1972 West County Road, Calais, Vermont 05648-7562

The day started out like any other birding trip to Jones Beach State Park, always a good spot for birding. I hadn't heard of anything much being there, but figured you never know what's going to be seen. When we got to the park we first stopped at the Coast Guard station and, in addition to what we expected, saw a large flock of American Oystercatchers, some lingering Laughing Gulls, and a decidedly late immature Common Tern . After taking a quick walk around the perimeter of the station parking lot and driveway we decided to go the Gilgo Beach area to search there for any unusual birds. By this time it was about noon and we were in need of some food and drink to warm us up since it was windy and close to freezing that day. At this point we decided to go to the Central Mall south of the water tower since I usually check that area out for birds and because I knew the smaller restaurant would be open.

After eating we headed out to the mall, which has plantings of various shrubs, small trees and perennials, providing good habitat for passerines throughout the year. As we were passing the flagpole I spotted a warbler-sized bird flying right in front of us and immediately thought Black-throated Green Warbler because of the amount of yellow seen on the head , even in flight. We also thought Pine Warbler but that was quickly discounted because the yellow was too bright for that species. The bird flew around the south side of the closed main restaurant and disappeared from sight. We went after it but briefly lost it before it came out on the north side and flew into some low shrubs adjacent to the sidewalk. It was at this point we saw it well and realized it looked wrong for a Black-throated Green. I immediately thought Hermit Warbler, but being unfamiliar with that species in the wild I needed a book to make sure.

We went back to the car and took a look in Sibley (2000) as well as the National Geographic Field Guide (1999).

After deciding that it was most probably a Hermit we went back to double-check. The bird came out into the sun and gave us great looks. We noticed its face was a beautiful clear yellow when in the sun. Its crown, forehead, back and rump were pale green and the crown had small dark spots on it. There was an indistinct dark splotch at the upper breast and lower throat area. A very faint pale yellow wash could be seen just below that dark splotch. We could also see there were very indistinct dark streaks on the back. The bird's belly and breast were whitish with virtually no marks except for two black lines on the sides below the

bend of each wing. There was no yellow on the vent as in a Black-throated Green. Each wing had two distinct white wingbars.

As far as we could tell this bird was a Hermit Warbler but none of the pictures showed exactly what we were seeing. Neither of the books showed all of the plumages for the birds so I figured we would have to look in Dunn and Garrett (1997) and Curson, Quinn and Beadle (1994) when we got home.

After checking in both books, Dunn and Garrett was the only one to show most of the possible plumages of the warblers. We also noticed that some of the hybrids between the Hermit and Townsend's Warblers pictured were similar to our bird but not close enough to it. I had not even thought of it being a hybrid at the time. After reading the descriptions and looking at the pictures we were 95% confident in saying it was a Hermit Warbler in a fall plumage.

I wanted to be totally sure of its identification and wanted a third opinion on the bird. I called John Moyle, a veteran birder friend of mine, to see if he was free to go back the next day and take a look at this warbler. After getting off the phone I sent out an e-mail to NYSBIRDS-L stating I had found a possible Hermit Warbler at Jones Beach.

John and I arrived the next morning at around eight and found the bird right away along the hedge in the middle of the mall near where I had seen it the previous day. I didn't think anyone would've gotten my e-mail so early in the morning but Seth Ausubel was arriving at the same time we did. The three of us followed the bird for a while as it crawled around under the chrysanthemum plantings on either side of the closed restaurant. This was when we were able to see the yellow eye- ring and greenish auriculars and lores clearly. These two characteristics pointed us directly to the Hermit Warbler in first fall male plumage. In our opinion the bird looked virtually identical to the picture in Dunn and Garrett.

At this point Seth put the word out via phone that it was definitely a Hermit Warbler. When I got home I went right for the computer and sent the word out to NYSBirds to let everyone know that it indeed was a Hermit. I went back on four additional occasions to show friends the bird, the last being Monday when it was no longer present. In the four days it stuck around (28 Nov-1 Dec) numerous birders were able to get great looks at it, and several including Seth Ausubel and Angus Wilson were able to get excellent photos of the bird for documentation. Unbeknownst to me at the time of first sighting, Hermit Warbler had not been seen in New York State!

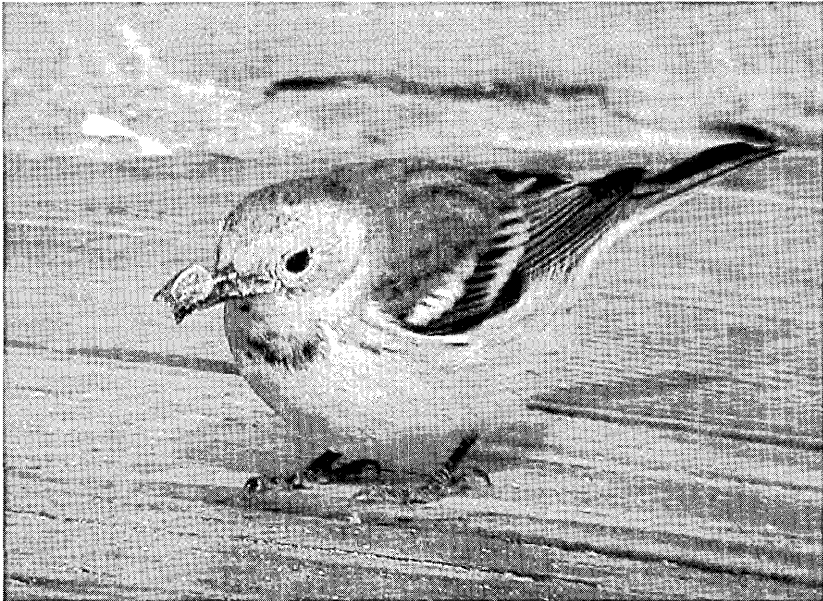
In its normal range it breeds mostly in montane coniferous forests from western Washington to northwestern California and in the mountain ranges along the coast and eastern part of California.. Hermits winter mostly from western Mexico to Central America. Strays have reached the East Coast rarely, with only one sighting each in Connecticut, Quebec, and Newfoundland, two in Massachusetts, and three in Nova Scotia (American Ornithologist's Union,1998.)

As more and more people saw the bird, the possibility of its being a hybrid between a Hermit and a Townsend's Warbler was brought up. I'm no expert on hybrids but to me there didn't seem to be enough distinctive field marks to call it a definitive hybrid. Everything would seem to indicate Hermit Warbler, but for the yellow wash on the upper breast, which suggested that this individual might be a hybrid. I'm going to leave this discussion (argument) to NYSARC.

No matter what NYSARC decides on the subject, I'm just glad I found it and so many people were able to see what may or may not be New York's first Hermit Warbler. If it's decided that it's a hybrid, I'd be happy to count both Hermit and Townsend's on my list!

Literature Cited

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