

# **AN UNUSUALLY PLUMAGED CERULEAN WARBLER SINGING A NORTHERN PARULA SONG IN DUTCHESS COUNTY, NY**

**Carena Pooth**

22 Brothers Road, Poughquag, NY 12570

carena@prodigy.net

**Rodney Johnson**

16 Sunset Road, Rhinebeck, NY 12572

rodneymjohnson@yahoo.com

While conducting breeding bird surveys at the Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site in Hyde Park on 4 June 2004, Carena Pooth (CP) heard the classic song of a Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) in a large sycamore tree. The bird sang the same song over and over again, while CP sat on the steep hill next to the tree, watching for activity. After a few minutes, CP saw a small bird moving about high in the tree. Her vantage point was excellent, as she was about 25 feet above the tree's ground level and about 100 feet away. The parula song, an ascending, buzzy trill ending with an abrupt note, was repeated over and over and over. To CP's great surprise, when the bird finally emerged from the dense foliage, it looked like a Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) rather than a Northern Parula. It continued to sing, and CP could see clearly through her binoculars that what appeared to be a Cerulean Warbler was, indeed, singing the Northern Parula song.

CP was able to look at the bird for several minutes. A few things just didn't seem right about its plumage. Although the bird looked overall like a Cerulean Warbler (blue above and white below, with wingbars and a blue/gray necklace), the head appeared round and completely blue, like a Northern Parula's, with what appeared to be an indistinct eye-ring. There was no visible streaking on the flanks and the necklace, though clearly evident, was a bit weak. The underside of the bird looked creamy white.

After hearing about CP's sighting on the internet, Rodney Johnson (RJ) went to see the bird on 5 June. He located the bird immediately and spent about two hours watching and listening to it. RJ found that the bird was singing the Northern Parula song, except that during a period of about five minutes it sang the first 2-3 buzzy notes of a Cerulean song. Twice it sang only the first two notes of the Cerulean song, and then after a brief silence it sang sets of three Cerulean notes. Then it went back to the parula song.

RJ noticed the same plumage anomalies that CP had noted on the previous day. The bird perched in a willow "for what seemed like an eternity for any warbler," according to RJ, so he had the opportunity to study it at some length. RJ noted that the broken eye-ring was more defined than it would be on a Cerulean of any age. There was no eye line or supercilium evident and the malar region lacked the white that extends between the nape and cheek, as is normally characteristic of a Cerulean Warbler at any age.

During the first 15 minutes that RJ observed the bird, he noticed a typical female Cerulean in the same area. This is the only female Cerulean Warbler that has been reported at this site.

CP visited the Vanderbilt site on 12 and 20 May; 4, 7, 13, and 21 June; and 2, 12, and 22 July. On 12 May she heard a Northern Parula song but did not see the bird that was singing it. She concluded that this was a migrating Northern Parula. After 12 May, she observed neither Northern Parula nor Cerulean Warbler until 4 June. RJ saw the bird in question on 5 June and looked for it again (unsuccessfully) on 6 June. The bird was not heard or seen again until 21 June, when CP once again heard the Northern Parula song in the same tree. On that occasion, the bird descended to within 15 feet of CP so that she could once again observe its unusual plumage characteristics, including what now was a clearly visible broken eye ring. After 21 June there were no further reports of this bird or any other Ceruleans or Northern Parulas at the Vanderbilt site. Two other birders visited the site on June 23 but did not hear or see the bird.

RJ had worked at the Vanderbilt site in 2003, leading a team that was removing invasive trees. He spent a considerable amount of time that year on the hill from which CP first heard and saw the Cerulean Warbler this year. In 2003, RJ did not see or hear Cerulean Warbler or Northern Parula at Vanderbilt. CP had also worked on spring bird surveys at Vanderbilt in 2002 and 2003. The only observation of Northern Parula or Cerulean Warbler that she recorded during those years was of a Northern Parula that she heard and saw in the very same sycamore tree exactly two years before this year's 4 June sighting.

There are a few intriguing accounts of observed or possible Northern Parula/Cerulean Warbler associations elsewhere. Patricia Lindsay and Tom Vezo (1995) reported a male Northern Parula and a female Cerulean Warbler tending the same nest in Long Island in June 1994. While not excluding the possibility, Lindsay and Vezo cautioned against immediately assuming hybridization in this case, saying that there could be some reason why the Northern Parula began bringing food to a nest that was not its own. More recently, there have been reports of suspected "Parulean" hybrids in Pennsylvania and Ohio. The Eastern PA Birdline of April, 19, 2002 reported that "a possible Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler hybrid was also seen [near the Bethlehem Boat Club Launch]. The bird was singing a Northern Parula song." A year later, in May 2003, a more detailed description of a bird seen at the same location was posted: "Also seen was a bird presumed to be a Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler hybrid. The bird 'basically looks like a Northern Parula, but it doesn't have any yellow on the breast or throat. It also lacks any hint of a chestnut or black breast band. Instead, the underparts are all white with a distinct bluish band across the upper breast like a Cerulean. It also appears to be mostly blue on the upperparts without an olive wash.'" And once again in 2004, each of the May 6 and May 13 transcripts of the Eastern PA Birdline includes a one-line report of a Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler hybrid at the same location.

The Ohio bird, known locally as "the Toledo warbler" was found by Rick Nirschl and seen by at least five others (Nirschl *et al.* 2004 and Busam 2004). This bird was singing songs of both Cerulean Warbler and Northern Parula. Some excellent photographs were posted on the online Toledo Area Rare Bird Alert forum (Stiefel 2004 and Zwiebel 2004). Based on these images (see Figs. 1

and 2), this bird appeared very similar to the Vanderbilt bird, although the Ohio bird lacked the necklace that was quite evident on the New York bird. Nirschl wrote a detailed account of the Toledo warbler for *The Ohio Cardinal*, concluding that it very possibly was a hybrid Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler (Nirschl, 2004).

The internet has once again served as an efficient medium for timely communication and discussion of unusual bird sightings. Knowing that "Paruleans" have been observed in two other states and having been able to read the discussions and study the photographs of the Ohio bird online, we cannot help wondering whether the Vanderbilt bird was a hybrid. Dutchess County, NY has a few locations where Cerulean Warblers are known to have bred, and the first (and only) confirmed nesting of Northern Parula in the county was recorded in 2002 (about 15-20 miles east of Vanderbilt NHS). Might this year's oddly plumaged Cerulean be a descendant of the Northern Parula that was observed in the same tree at Vanderbilt on 4 June, 2002?

## LITERATURE AND ONLINE REFERENCES CITED

- Busam, Mike. 2004. "Nirschl's Toledo Warbler." *Ohio Birding News* (online) August 2004:  
[http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News\\_ID=97](http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News_ID=97)
- Busam, Mike. 2004. Interesting Toledo Warbler. *Ohio Birding News* (online) July 2004:  
[http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News\\_ID=88](http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News_ID=88)
- Lindsay, Patricia V. and Vezo, Tom. 1995. Cerulean Warbler and Northern Parula Tending the Same Nest. *The Kingbird* 45: 160-161.
- Eastern PA Birdline, April 19, 2002. Transcript:  
<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0204c&L=birdeast&F=&S=&P=1910>
- Eastern PA Birdline, May 1, 2003. Transcript:  
<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0305a&L=birdeast&F=&S=&P=67>
- Eastern PA Birdline, May 6, 2004. Transcript:  
<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0405a&L=birdeast&F=&S=&P=1012>
- Eastern PA Birdline, May 13, 2004. Transcript:  
<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0405b&L=birdeast&F=&S=&P=1095>
- Nirschl, Rick. 2004. A Possible Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler Hybrid in Toledo, Ohio. *The Ohio Cardinal* 28:1 (in press).
- Nirschl, Rick *et al.* 2004. Parula/Cerulean Hybrid at Wildwood? Toledo Area Rare Bird Alert forum, June 30, 2004 (online):  
[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=320&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=320&PN=1)
- Stiefel, Laura. 2004. Parula X Cerulean hybrid images. Toledo Area Rare Bird Alert forum, July 6, 2004 (online):  
[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=324&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=324&PN=1)
- Zwiebel, Brian. 2004. More Photos of Probable Hybrid. Toledo Area Rare Bird Alert forum, July 13, 2004 (online):  
[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=334&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=334&PN=1)