

CEDAR WAXWING, SCARLET TANAGER, AND BALTIMORE ORIOLE IN GENESEE COUNTY IN 1833

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When the first settlers moved into upstate New York in the late 1700s, they trashed the place. They destroyed the existing ecosystems and replaced them with farmland (Hedrick 1933). Now, with the state lands maturing and small family farms being abandoned, forests are returning. The question is whether what is growing back is at all similar to what was originally here and if not, what are the differences? To answer this question, some of us are trying to document what was originally here by examining the earliest writings and taking inventories of animal and plant species (Windsor & Storms 2002). Knowing what species of birds were here would give us a good indication of the type of habitats.

However, the biggest disappointment has been the paucity of recorded bird sightings. It baffles me how the earliest settlers could have been so oblivious to birds. Their diaries are full of vivid descriptions of their aches and pains, family and neighborhood squabbles, and routine chores, but virtually nothing about nature. The closest we have found are bounty records.

Consequently, I was pleasantly surprised when I stumbled upon a short article in *The Genesee Farmer and Gardener* (Anon 1833). It is just a single paragraph which is quoted here verbatim.

VORACIOUS BIRDS

Many of our apricots and early pears have been destroyed by the red tanager, the Baltimore Oriole, and the cedar bird. Of the latter we expected nothing better; but the tanager and oriole are new enemies, and are even worse than their associate. Very few pears would be suffered to ripen if we had not taken measures to lessen their flocks. Hereafter we shall consider all these entitled to the same treatment.

The exact measures in this treatment are not specified, but I suppose death by gunshot. How many beautiful birds does it take to incur the avicidal wrath of fruit farmers? Can you imagine so many waxwings, tanagers, and orioles that they are a problem? Are they still a problem? Nevertheless, this short article documents the presence of the Cedar Waxwing, "red tanager", and Baltimore Oriole in Genesee County in 1833.

Exactly which tanager is documented is not clear. The name "red tanager" could apply to either the Scarlet Tanager or the Summer Tanager. The closest synonyms I could find were "crimson tanager, redbird, rose tanager, and summer redbird" (Terres 1980). "Summer redbird" would indicate Summer Tanager. However, the Summer Tanager is not listed in the breeding bird atlas (Andrle & Carroll 1988) and is so uncommon today as to be NYSARC reportable. This begs the question of whether the Summer Tanager was so abundant here in 1833 that it was a pest? Or was the name, "red tanager" just a colloquial way of referring to

the Scarlet Tanager? Until compelling evidence to the contrary comes forth, it seems prudent to assume it was the Scarlet Tanager.

The exact location is also unclear, because in 1833 Genesee County included land which became Wyoming County in 1841 (McCulley 1985).

One of the many benefits of documenting our earliest birds is a better understanding of how our current populations came to be. It is easy to shrug this off as being inconsequential, but I oppose that view because it is certainly not based on much evidence. Before drawing any conclusions we really need more historical documentation. The article by Levine (2000) listed 133 species during the winter of 1871-72 and was an important discovery. We need more of these. The first Europeans appeared in New York State in 1524 when Giovanni de Verrazano discovered New York harbor and the Hudson River (Wright 2002), so we have four centuries to search for birds prior to the 1900s. One of the reasons that the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, now the New York State Ornithological Association, was organized is to document the ornithology of the State. This mission is printed on the inside front cover of every issue of *The Kingbird* and is not limited to current ornithology. Most birders prefer birding in the field rather than birding in the library. However, we need both. I propose that we try to document the earliest report of every species in New York State, and then strive to find even earlier reports.

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