

## A SWAINSON'S WARBLER IN FOREST PARK, QUEENS

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The 2005 spring season started early when Kelly Bossong phoned me on Wednesday 30 March just before 2:00 pm to tell me she and her husband Richard had just returned from Forest Park. Would I please post on the computer that they had seen a beautiful male Prothonotary Warbler at the waterhole? Would I! "Kelly, you're killing me. I'm on my way to work; I don't have time to run over to the waterhole. But of course I will post it for you." And so it began...

Even though I needed to get to work, I couldn't resist stopping in for "just 5-10 minutes" just to try. As I stood there looking around, I berated myself—what did I think I was doing? I didn't even have my bins with me, and I had to get going already! But I tried a little "pishing", and immediately, the Prothonotary came within a few feet of me, giving me great looks. I dashed off to get to work, making a quick phone call to pass along information about specifically where he was last seen. Al Ott, Eric Miller, and Lloyd and Sandy Spitalnik were all able to get there and locate it, but for some reason it was much more secretive in the afternoon, and they had to really work for their views.

Over the next few days, every spare second was spent running up to the "waterhole" area to marvel at this stunningly colorful bird in an otherwise dreary season. On Saturday 2 April it was raining steadily all morning, but even that wasn't enough to keep several hardy souls from trying for another look. Meeting fellow birder Karlo Mirth on my way in, I was greeted with astounding news: not only was the Prothonotary still there, but now there were also Swainson's and Bachman's warblers! As I stared in disbelief, I was then told that there had been a little "April Fool's Joke" the day before on the NYC RBA, which Karlo couldn't resist repeating. Little did we know at the time how this joke would play out as events unfolded!

Sunday 3 April brought another surprise: there were now TWO Prothonotary Warblers at the waterhole. At times, the two were perched on the same branch, and often extremely close to observers. Wednesday 6 April and Thursday 7 April brought Yellow-throated Warblers to Hempstead Lake State Park (on Long Island) and Central Park, respectively. All the previously mentioned birds continued for several days, and during this time things started to get really interesting. From that Wednesday, 6 April, and over the following few days, Prothonotary Warblers were reported in Jamaica Bay, Cunningham Park, Prospect Park, Central Park, Hempstead Lake and Robert Moses, in addition to at least one still in Forest Park. When yet another Yellow-throated Warbler was found in Prospect Park on Tuesday 12 April, it was obvious this year's spring season was a special one. This was proved again that very day by a totally unexpected discovery at Forest Park.

That morning I had gotten up early after a lousy night's sleep. It was a cool morning, about 38 degrees F, with variable cloud cover. It was a little after 9:00 am, and I had plans to go to Kissena Park about noon. But since I was up, I figured I would go check out "Kelly's Prothonotary" and kill a little time in Forest Park. The extremely cooperative bird was enjoyed long enough that I decided to

walk around and see if anything else had come in yet. Leaving the waterhole area, I saw movement on the ground up ahead, and went to investigate. What I saw was an absolutely plain, smallish bird, foraging around the leaf litter at the base of a tree.

Trying to identify it was quite a challenge: while the bird was totally ignoring me at very close range (sometimes just a few feet), I was completely stumped as to what it could be. I watched for a good twenty minutes, during which time I just kept trying to memorize as many field marks as possible. The back of the bird was a brownish-olive-ish color. Its solid cap seemed faintly rusty, but depending on lighting, this wasn't always apparent. It had a whitish line over the eye, but depending on the lighting, this wasn't always apparent. It had a blackish smudge line through the eye, but... you know what comes next. The underside was a grayish-white with no markings whatsoever that I could see. It was difficult to get a good look at either the legs or the bill because of the foraging behavior. Still no clue. It just wasn't behaving like anything that clicked with the kind of markings (or lack thereof) I was observing. After about 10 minutes of very active probing behavior, the bird all of a sudden started a very strange "shaking" behavior. This was repeated quite a few times, and then would stop and the bird would continue foraging. It being a very cool morning, I wondered if the bird was cold, especially since it had been feeding voraciously since I first observed it. During the few glimpses I had of the bill, I tried to see any color or shape distinctions, but I just couldn't get an adequate look to make a judgment. The same was true for the legs, although I could finally see they were lightish in color.

At this point I decided I had to move to take out my field guide. My movement flushed the bird, and I watched it go while I fished out my book. Paging back and forth, more paging back and forth, and the only thing I was able to do was eliminate the few possibilities I hadn't really thought it was in the first place. How many plain, smallish birds foraging on a forest floor could there be? None of the birds I might expect to encounter in the park, such as Orange-crowned Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Warbling Vireo, were close enough in behavior and markings to qualify. Book in hand, I relocated the bird, and repeated all of the paging back and forth, coming to the same conclusion. I still just couldn't figure it out. I finally gave up, chalking it up as an "LBJ" (little brown job).

Continuing my walk about a half-hour later, I saw Kelly and Richard Bossong back near the waterhole. I told them about this plain bird I had that I just couldn't identify, and brought them over to the last area I had seen the bird. I was able to relocate the bird fairly easily, and the three of us stared at it, going over all the field marks again. At that moment, the bird picked up its head, giving us a clear profile shot. Kelly took one look at the bill and said, "Jean, I think that's a Swainson's Warbler". Hearing a Swainson's Warbler mentioned the second time in a week and a half, I just told her, "Get out of here!" thinking she was continuing the joke. However, at the same time, I was looking at the bird in profile, and looking at the picture in the book, and I had the sudden realization that she could quite possibly be right!! The next few minutes were spent in a quick back and forth consideration of whether we were actually correct, and if so, what would be our next course of action.

Phone calls were placed to Al Ott and Eric Miller, two people we knew could get to Forest Park in a hurry and help with a positive identification. Al was able to get there in about 15 minutes, Eric shortly thereafter. As Al closely examined the bird, he concluded we did indeed have a Swainson's Warbler in front of us. Thanks to cell phones and the internet, word was spread quickly. I think the first group of people arrived within about an hour and a half. As the day went on, more people continued to arrive, and the bird remained in very visible areas, allowing close scrutiny for the entire day.

The next day I had other commitments and was not able to stop in the park at all. Apparently none of the many different birders looking were able to relocate the bird, although later in the week one person said they had seen the bird briefly at the end of the day on Wednesday, 13 April. At about 9:30 am on Thursday 14 April, I decided to recheck all the places I had observed the bird previously, just in case it was still in the area. At the waterhole, I met Bob Brooks, who had come in from Manhattan, and together we searched around. Within about 15 minutes, we were able to relocate the bird, and sent out word immediately that the bird was back! The bird remained in the area for the next few days, and was well seen by many, many people through Sunday 17 April.

Postscript. Additional Yellow-throated and Prothonotary warblers continued to be reported around New York City and vicinity through at least the middle of May, and there were as many as four additional Swainson's Warbler reports: Central Park 6-8 May, Hempstead Lake 1 May, Cutchogue 12 May, and Staten Island 27 May.

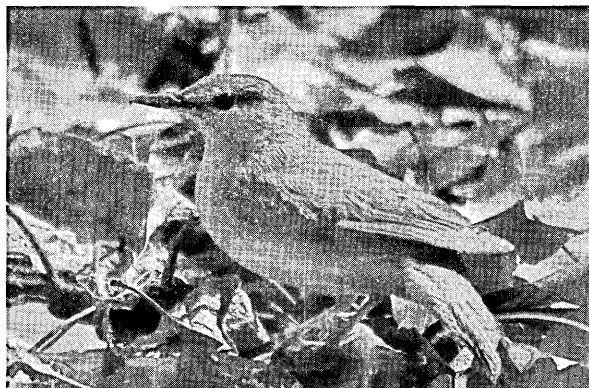


Figure 1.  
Swainson's Warbler, Forest Park, Queens. 12 April 2005.  
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