

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

A FLYCATCHER'S TALE: THREE BIRDERS, TWO STOPS ON THE A-TRAIN, AND ONE SPECIAL BIRD

For people in New York City, especially birders, having a car is a luxury, and carpooling is a familiar occurrence. On Saturday, 21 November 2009, I was on the phone with my friends Rich Aracil and Heydi Lopes, going back and forth trying to decide where to be picked up the following morning. Rich had a car his father had lent him, and we were planning to go to Jones Beach, Long Island, to look for recently reported Black-legged Kittiwakes and Snow Buntings and any other goodies that might show up.

Wanting to do as little city driving as possible, Rich at first thought it would be best if we met up near where he lives in the Bronx. After looking at a map, I quickly saw that it would be better for all of us to meet at the Lefferts Boulevard A-Train station and informed Rich and Heydi of the plan. Only 30 minutes later, I realized that that it would be even more convenient to meet instead at the Aqueduct-North Conduit A-Train station. This way, I could just take the A train from Manhattan and Heydi could just take a bus and a train without having to make the trek into Manhattan on a Sunday morning train schedule. The fateful plan was in place; we all agreed to meet at 10:30am at the Aqueduct-North Conduit station.

The following morning, Rich, being a little too eager, got there about 40 minutes early. Heydi was 15 minutes early, and I was like 10 minutes late (sorry guys!). Before meeting up with them, I took my binoculars out. Rich had his car parked two blocks down the street. As we were exiting the train station, we shared anecdotes of our biological fieldwork, banding projects, and bird sightings, and looked forward to our planned day of birding at Jones Beach.

Although not completely paved-over, the short walk to the car was through an area anyone would categorize as urban. It was noisy and bustling with weekend motorists; immediately to our left, we had the busy traffic of North Conduit Avenue and the constant din of cars rushing down the nearby Belt Parkway. To our right was a neglected property occupied by a few graffiti-scrawled, dilapidated buildings and a vacant lot overgrown with mostly non-native vegetation and littered with trash. All of this was surrounded by a deteriorating chain-link fence.

We were making our way down the sidewalk, with Rich telling me of his bird banding work in Ohio this summer, when, out of the corner of my eye, a uniquely avian movement caught my attention. I trained my eyes on the spot, through the fence some 7 ft high and about 12 ft away. With my bare eyes I could see that the bird was about the size of a tanager, with a very pale belly contrasting with a gray back, and bill shaped like that of a flycatcher, and I immediately blurted out, "Flycatcher!" Rich and Heydi were at first not sure where I was referring to as they both scrambled to locate the bird.

The sun was behind us so any picture opportunity would have been ideal. The temperature was warmer than predicted by the weather station at 55° F, with <10% cloud cover and winds <4 mph. It was certainly a good day to go birding at Jones beach. But not today—little did we know our original plan was dead in the water before we even got in the car!

With a little observation, I was able to identify the bird as an Ash-throated Flycatcher. I guess it's hard to believe one can identify such a bird so quickly, but I have seen this species many times on its "normal" range. I'm aware that the next thing birders might say is: "that's not enough reason to reach that conclusion" but experience in identifying these birds can be extremely helpful. Ash-throated Flycatcher is found in the western US and south to Honduras, favoring open habitat and foraging from near ground to mid level. It is a rare but regular late fall vagrant to the east coast, including Long Island. It can be distinguished from the other *Myiarchus* species by behavior, plumage, voice, and habitat. Great-crested Flycatcher breeds in eastern North America and winters in southern Mexico to northern South America, in general favoring the edge canopy of wooded habitats. Although this is the expected species of *Myiarchus* in New York in spring and summer, it is very rare here in late fall. Its rather bright yellow belly and deeply gray upper breast are very unlike the bird we found in Queens on this late November day. Brown-crested, Nutting's and Dusky-capped Flycatchers are very unlikely to occur in New York, and furthermore differ from the bird we saw in details such as the patterns of the wing and tail feathers.

With the bird still on its original perch, Rich sprinted back to the car to get his camera and binoculars. Within a minute or so, we had all of our equipment ready. I began to get set up to take digiscoped shots while Rich and Heydi scrutinized the bird and its behavior in order to clinch the identification, also trying to get good photos to document the find. Of course, three birders and all their optical gear in the middle of an environment like this stirred the curiosity of a passerby. The man asked us what we were looking at. Being courteous, although not at all interested in talking at the moment, I started explaining to him what we were seeing instead of focusing my attention on the bird. The bird then flew low to the ground to forage in the shrubby vegetation. It then perched on a branch above. I made several attempts at photographing the bird, but my efforts were in vain. Next the bird flew up into a tree, perched momentarily, but then flew behind the buildings in the lot.

We ran around the block, lugging our scope, binoculars and field guides to behind the building, where we were greeted with a fine selection of trash—from McDonald's burger wrappers and various plastics to tires and all manner of refuse in between. After some 20 minutes we were able to again locate the bird foraging low to the ground around a thicket of mugwort. We would alternately lose the bird and then locate it again after watching for movement in the low shrubs and by searching through whatever birds flew by, mostly Dark-eyed Juncos and House Sparrows. We had to use this strategy repeatedly in order to observe behavior, plumage or any other characteristics. During one of the breaks between sightings, Rich called Lloyd Spanaltik, the moderator and owner of the

rare bird listserv Metro Birding Briefs, in order to quickly get word out to the birding community.

Suddenly the Ash-throated Flycatcher flew a block away toward another abandoned fenced-off lot, where we quickly lost sight of it. We searched for over 40 minutes but came up with nothing. At that time, the idea that the bird may have left the area, never to be seen again, was starting to creep into our minds. We began reviewing the images on our cameras and, although Rich and I got hardly anything conclusive, we were relieved to see that Heydi managed to get one blurry shot that was at least identifiable to genus. We were glad to have something tangible to support our sighting.

I decided I would walk over to where we originally found the bird, but after several minutes, Heydi motioned to tell me she had relocated it. We all ran over and were treated to more off-and-on views for about another hour. By 12:40 or so we were ready to head for Jones Beach, to resume our original plan for the day. That's when Andrew Baksh pulled up as the "first responder" to our report. We got him on the bird in a matter of minutes, and two of his photos can be seen on page 44 of this issue. Over the next two hours, ten or so more birders arrived to see the bird as well. Watching all the people show up to share in our find was a lot of fun so we decided to stay and scrap our plan for Jones Beach.

It's amazing how fast information gets spread around with technology and it's great that so many got to see the bird during the time it stayed; it lingered until 17 December. Even more amazing is that a bird like this showed up in such a place as this. It makes one wonder what else could be lurking in these neglected parts of the city where no one birds, or would even think of birding, for that matter.

I think we would all agree that it is moments like these that make birding so exciting. It also reinforces the fact that birds are extremely mobile and can literally show up anywhere, so it pays to keep your eyes peeled!

Rudy Badia, with Richard Aracil and Heydi Lopes, New York City.

A SWAINSON'S HAWK IN GREENE COUNTY

About 4 PM, 3 October 2009, I was stopped at a red light, about to make a turn onto the NYS Thruway (I-87) at the New Baltimore/Coxsackie Exit. As I was waiting, I noticed a brownish streaked bird foraging in the grassy strip at the side of the highway. My first reaction, I thought grouse or pheasant. But on second look, I saw it was a hawk, running in the knee-high grass along the shoulder, pouncing on some unseen prey. Things didn't add up to any hawk species I might have expected—even in this unusual circumstance. I snapped a few photos through the car window, just to be sure.

Fortunately, there were no cars behind me, or streaming down the highway. So I was able to pull out of the turn lane over to the shoulder where I could see the bird up close. I managed to get a few more photos, this time up close and through the open passenger window. The hawk flew up to a road sign, so I got

out and got a few more photos. I was still not sure what species I was looking at. It resembled a very heavily marked juvenile Red-shouldered or Broad-winged Hawk. But, the ingredients were not adding up right.

The hawk flew up to a more distant billboard; I took a few more pictures—to get a dorsal view of the bird and especially the tail. Then with the bird safely out of the harm's way of fast moving traffic, I went on my way.

I sent my son, Andy, a few of the photos and asked his opinion. Well, he happened to be on the road and was not able to see the pictures until Monday morning. His reply was that he believed it to be a juvenile Swainson's Hawk and sent me a few links to pictures of a similarly plumaged bird taken in Texas. Yup, there was a match. To be sure, I had considered Swainson's earlier, but none of the references I checked had illustrations of the plumage of the bird I had seen.

With that, I sent a note out on the internet on Monday evening, 5 October. Fortunately, I was able to relocate the bird on Tuesday, 6 October, and sent a note to Andy and others who posted in on the appropriate list-serves. The hawk remained remarkably faithful to the small stretch of highway within about half a mile in either direction. This turned out to be a very easy bird for birders to check out. It was just off the Interstate highway exit, and could often be "ticked" even before paying the tolls.

A number of birders, including myself, shared concerns for the safety of the hawk given its propensity to forage very close to the shoulder of this very busy fast speed roadway, and to fly dangerously low in front of oncoming traffic. Luckily, the hawk managed to not get run over by a fast moving truck or bus.

On several occasions, the Swainson's was seen to fly off, gaining altitude and soaring off to the southeast, becoming little more than a speck in the sky. Yet he/she returned after each of these lengthy absences, usually flying into the same roadside trees or onto the by now familiar billboard. Despite several favorable winds with which the bird might have joined several other hawks seen migrating by, the hawk stayed around for the next week, being seen daily until the afternoon of Wednesday, 14 October.

On Thursday, I searched the road shoulders and ditch just to be sure. Fortunately, I didn't find a hawk. So I think it is safe to assume the bird flew off and continued its journey south.

Richard Guthrie, New Baltimore.

