

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

GRACE'S WARBLER ON LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK: A FIRST FOR THE EAST COAST OF NORTH AMERICA

On January 1, 2012 I participated in the Point Lookout section of the Southern Nassau County Christmas Bird Count. My party consisted of Seth Ausubel, Andrew Baksh, and for a brief time Pat Aitken. At about 10:00 AM we pulled into the Town of Hempstead Beach parking lot (directly opposite the southern terminus of Loop Parkway) to bird the edges of the lot, and the pines and rock pile to the north of the lot. The times below are taken from time stamps from my photos, as I was not so concerned about the time while this was going on.

After brief discussion on a division of labor, Seth and Pat went down to work the south edges of the lot and the dunes there, and Andrew and I would work the pines and rock pile heading west, and our groups would meet at the eastern edge of the parking lot. I gave Seth one of my two-way radios, and kept the other on me. Andrew and I walked up to the pines next to where the big "Exit" sign is along the entrance/exit road on the north side of the parking lot. I asked him if he wanted the over or the under on seven individual non-introduced passerines on our walk. He took the under, and I agreed, since it had been a very slow morning for passerines (and most birds in general) so far. After pishing for a minute or two at the edge of the pines, we stopped pishing and were about to see if we could penetrate the pine stand to look for owls. Andrew was already moving towards the pines looking for a way in when I saw a small (smaller than a sparrow) passerine in the pines, which I assumed would be a warbler. I told Andrew to "Stop," although he apparently didn't need telling as he got on the bird almost immediately as well. The bird of course, was doing a reasonably good job hiding in the shade of pine needle clusters. This was 10:10 AM.

My first view of it through binoculars was of a warbler in the shade, showing bold white wing-bars (covert tips). For the first second or so I could see no color and it was facing away and the head was obscured by a branch. The first thought that jumped to my head was that it was likely one of the more expected winter warblers to be found in a pine grove, a Pine Warbler, but it immediately moved into the sun a little, and I was able to see the GRAY base color of the back and wings, and I very briefly considered Yellow-throated Warbler. When it turned slightly and showed restricted yellow on the throat and the thick yellow supra-loral area, I said something along the lines of "Uuuuhhhh, is this a Graaace's Warbler...?" Andrew, being rightly skeptical, asked, "Why isn't it a Pine Warbler?" I mentioned the gray back and lack of spectacles with the large amount of yellow above the eye, and the small bill, and that it looked like it was a Grace's Warbler. While this conversation was going on I was already taking photos like mad, although the bird was still obscured. I started pishing some more and it seemed to respond, as it came closer and popped up into the sun for brief periods. This whole time I was just taking lots

of photos of the bird. The only time I looked at them was to briefly make sure that the settings were right. Luckily Andrew was still on the bird at this point, so I could go right back to taking photos. It then disappeared into the impenetrable pine fortress. We were still in disbelief that a **Grace's Warbler** could be here, and I mentioned that maybe there was some range of variation of some Pine Warbler plumage that I'd never seen that had a grayish back and washed out/not noticeable spectacles, although I couldn't figure out what age/sex combo that would be. In any event, it clearly wasn't a Yellow-throated Warbler given the lack of black on the throat, flanks, and the face. The bill size and thinness was also bothersome, because this would rule out both Pine and Yellow-throated. I had had extensive experience with Grace's Warblers in the mountains of southeast Arizona in April and May, and a small bill was certainly a characteristic of that species. Hmmm.

I radioed Seth that we had a "Possible Pine Warbler, unless it was a Grace's Warbler." He responded back, "Possible Pine Warbler, what is that, a new subspecies?" I told him I would let him know of any further developments.

Andrew and I, after briefly hemming and hawing over going back to the car to double check Pine Warbler variation in a field guide, decided that we would keep birding since there was clearly some activity, and that this bird obviously wasn't going anywhere, and would be there when we came back. As we worked a little to the east in what was quickly becoming clear was an area essentially devoid of birds, I mulled the idea of a Grace's Warbler over in my mind, and I became a little more comfortable with that initially unexpected possibility. It had certainly NOT previously been on my radar, and I couldn't remember any specific records on the east coast, and I couldn't remember considering it for my list of the "Next 10 species to show up in NYS." I stopped and looked back at the last photos I had taken, and as soon as the first photo popped onto the screen, just one single thought popped into my mind: "That's a Grace's Warbler." I told Andrew we needed to go back to the car (~100 yards away) immediately to double-check Pine Warbler variation in the Sibley. Mine was locked in Seth's car, so when we got to the car Andrew gave me his Eastern Sibley guide. I immediately ruled out the possibility of the bird being a Pine Warbler, and I wanted to show Andrew a picture of a Grace's to convince him, and just triple check to make sure that I wasn't crazy. (This was around 10:26 AM.) Of course it wasn't in that field guide, so we resorted to his *National Geographic* guide. While we got to that page, I giddily said something like: "Dude, it's a Grace's Warbler!"

We still needed to make sure I wasn't completely crazy and/or missing something, and to get other observers on the bird. I radioed Seth, and the conversation went like this:

Doug: "Seth, do you copy? It's a Grace's Warbler, not a Pine."

Seth: "What? [long pause] "Wait, you were serious about Grace's?!?!?"

Doug: "Yes, definitely. You gonna head over here?"

Seth (in classic sarcastic New Yorker fashion, and probably my favorite line of the day): "Oh I dunno, lemme *THINK* about it."...[let the sarcasm sink in]... "Yeah, I'll be right over."

We returned to the pine grove and were joined quickly by Seth and Pat. Andrew showed Seth a photo of it as Seth got to us, and the words that came out of Seth's mouth were quite excited and colorful—and not printable here.

We had at that point informed Shai Mitra, nearby in the Baldwin territory of the CBC. I told Shai we had a potential first east coast record, from the Southwest, for which we had initially considered Pine Warbler. He guessed correctly, if incredulously, "Grace's Warbler?!?" and awaited a photo on his phone. As we spread the word, we pished for a bit and nothing happened. Shai called me back as we were starting to use playback. He said "It looks like a Grace's Warbler!" and I said, "Yeah it's actually responding to tape right now." Shai's reply to this was also excited and colorful.

We played the Grace's Warbler song, and the bird came right out to the outside of the pine grove. The bird on the recording sang maybe five or so times before we stopped playback. We were then able to track it as it foraged partially in the open for a few minutes, and we posted the news online and contacted everyone we could think of.

Rich Kelly (who has been working this area of the CBC for 30 years or so) and Doug Futuyma, the other party in our area, showed up very shortly thereafter, but the bird wasn't showing at that time and we had decided against further using tape for the time being. Right on their heels were Shai Mitra and Pat Lindsay, defecting from their nearby CBC area of Baldwin. As Shai came up to us, I made a gesture to show him a photo on my camera. He adamantly refused, "I DON'T WANNA SEE IT, DON'T SHOW IT TO ME!" (This was, among other things, an indication of his confidence in the identification, as he is deeply averse to savoring images of rare birds he intends to try to see.)

Soon after, cars began to pour in carrying birders from all over the count circle, as the Southern Nassau CBC temporarily disintegrated, or rather was condensed down to just the Town of Hempstead Beach Park parking lot. We were planning to use tape again once the entire first wave of responders arrived, but luckily the bird was soon re-found without tape, by the sharp eye of Barbara McBrien. The bird then remained mostly cooperative until about 2 PM, although it wasn't coming in as close as earlier, and everybody who arrived within the first couple of hours eventually saw it well. The south(ish) wind picked up rapidly through the day, and those who arrived after 2 PM did not get to see the bird that afternoon.

Description

Obviously a medium-sized warbler, with a small, dainty, dark-colored bill. In life the base color of the back and wings looked decidedly gray to me, although later excellent photos by Lloyd Spitalnik, David Speiser, and Steve Walter showed it to be tinged with brown, mostly on the back and nape. It showed two distinct bold white wing bars. Its underparts were white, although it had some noticeable but sparse brown/black flank streaking. The throat was solidly yellow from the bill down to the top of the upper breast. It had a thick and obvious yellow supraloral stripe, and it appeared yellow all the way from the bill to above the eye, which showed no obvious spectacles or eye ring. The small

section of the supraloral posterior to the eye was white and there was a bit of white just below the eye in a short crescent. The combination of these latter two features sometimes manifested itself in life as noticeable eye arcs. In life I noticed some white on the tail (the outertail, although the exact location wasn't always evident). An excellent photo by Lloyd Spitalnik showed the exact pattern of the tail feathers: very extensive white covering almost the entire inner webs of the outer two rectrices (R5-R6); white bleeding into the outer webs of the upper parts of the outermost rectrices (R6); and white markings on the inner webs towards the tips of the fourth rectrices.

The above description is completely consistent with Grace's Warbler, and rules out all other species of bird. The small bill rules out both Pine Warbler and Yellow-throated Warbler. The lack of complete yellow "spectacles," mostly gray back, flank streaking, and overall contrast between the upperparts and the underparts also rule out Pine Warbler. The gray face, lacking black and a bold white supercilium, as well as the lack of thick black around the yellow throat, further rule out Yellow-throated Warbler. Northern Parula, which I actually didn't even consider upon seeing the bird, can be ruled out by the yellow above the eye, the lack of greenish tones on the back, the flank streaking, and the structure (longer-tailed, more streamlined) and size.

According to criteria in Pyle, and in Dunn & Garrett, we aged the bird as a 1st winter (= SY, or second calendar-year, given that it was found in January). Figuring out the sex of this bird is more difficult. According to available references, the black markings visible on the crown are more indicative of a SY male, while the narrow, sparse flank streaking, and lack of wide black centers to the back feathers are indicative of a female of this age. The amount of brown in the back is probably in the zone of ambiguity in terms of whether this is/was a male or female, and the pattern of the rectrices falls in the overlap zone between SY male and SY female, according to the Pyle guide.

As for subspecies, all indications are that this fits very well within the (more expected, I guess, but given the lack of precedent, this expectation doesn't hold that much water) nominate subspecies *graciae*, which also happens to be the most migratory and the one that occurs the farthest north of all the subspecies. Indicators of this subspecies are the more gray-brown (rather than blue-gray) upperparts, with narrower streaking, and the fact that the part of the supercilium behind the eye is white.

Patterns of vagrancy

Pending review, this is the first record of Grace's Warbler in New York State, and also the first for the entire East Coast of North America. In fact, it is only the second record of this species east of the Mississippi River, with the first one coming at Montrose Point, Chicago, Illinois on September 8, 2003. They are extremely rare (accidental outside of southern California) anywhere in the United States of America as winterers (although not necessarily DURING the winter; it is possible that some return to their breeding grounds in mid-March while it is still technically winter, but I do not know for sure what their normal arrival dates are). This is an unprecedented record in all respects.

*This individual was not seen after January 4, 2012, and due to intense wind from the afternoon of the 1st through the 3rd, it was difficult or impossible to find for many people during most of its stay. On the 3rd it was only briefly seen early in the morning and went MIA for the entire day. This note is based closely on a report submitted to the New York State Avian Records Committee. Two photos are reproduced in this issue on page 141.

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PHOTO GALLERY
Winter 2011-12



This Grace's Warbler was discovered by Doug Gochfeld and Andrew Baksh at Point Lookout, *Nassau*, during the Southern Nassau County Christmas Bird Count, 1 Jan 2012. Photographs © David Krauss. See pp. 128-132.