

The Ontario Specimen of Carolina Chickadee

by

Kenneth C. Parkes

On 18 May 1983 a Carolina Chickadee (*Parus carolinensis*) was netted at the tip of Long Point, Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk, Ontario. It was said to have been emaciated and weak, and died soon after capture. It is now specimen no. 28494 in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. I have found this event mentioned in three places in the literature. Weir (1983) pointed out that it was the first record of this species for Canada, but did not mention age or subspecific identification. James (1984) added the name of the collector, D. Shepherd, and the catalogue number of the specimen at the ROM. He stated furthermore that it was "the southern subspecies, *impiger*." Finally, Gustafson (1987), in a letter to the editor of *Birding*, claimed that this record removed the Carolina Chickadee from the list of species endemic to the United States, and also stated that it was "a hatchling of that year of the southern nesting race *P. c. carolinensis*."

This record caught my attention, as I am much interested in the Carolina Chickadee and its relationship to the Black-capped Chickadee (*P. atricapillus*) in the

northeastern areas of sympatry. I felt that both the subspecific identification (already equivocal, with two names having been cited) and the age ("hatchling of that year") could be questioned. Dr. Jon C. Barlow, Curator of Ornithology at the ROM, was kind enough to send me the specimen on loan. In his covering letter he reiterated that the bird was "in fact a young of the year, but a fully flying bird, although obviously immature." The specimen was examined after its death by Dr. Ross D. James.

To clear up the matter of the subspecific identification first, it should be pointed out that the name *impiger*, used by James (1984), refers not to the widespread southern race of Carolina Chickadee (which is nominate *carolinensis*), but to an alleged small Florida race, only reluctantly and provisionally accepted as separable from *carolinensis* in the thorough study of this species published by Lunk (1952). I have compared the Ontario specimen to the excellent series of 84 Carolina Chickadees in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. I was not surprised to find that it belongs to neither of the southern races, but is an exam-

Kenneth C. Parkes, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 4400 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213.

ple of *P. C. extimus*, the subspecies that breeds nearest to Long Point (less than 250km south in Ohio and western Pennsylvania). This subspecies differs from *carolinensis* both in size and colour. Among populations assigned to *carolinensis* by Lunk (1951) females had wing chords measuring 56.5 to 62mm, and tails 46.5 to 52.5mm. Females of *extimus* had wings of 57 to 65mm, and tails of 48.5 to 58mm. With a wing chord of 60mm and a tail of at least 55mm (the rectrices are worn), the Ontario bird's measurements clearly match those of the larger northern population.

As for colour, the best character

for distinguishing *extimus* from the more southern races is the much whiter (less grey) edgings of its flight feathers and wing coverts. Also useful is the colour of the sides and flanks, described by the authors of *extimus* (Todd and Sutton 1936) as "brighter reddish brown" than in *carolinensis*. Lunk (1952) describes northern birds as having "a heavy wash of pale rufous along the sides," whereas southern birds "are on the whole not quite so brightly washed on the sides." The Ontario specimen is a good match in both of these colour characters for specimens of *extimus* from West Virginia (including the type series)



Carolina Chickadee / drawing by Chris Blomme

and Pennsylvania.

My skepticism about the alleged age of the chickadee remains. The earliest egg date I have found for the Carolina Chickadee at the northern end of its range is 12 April (New Jersey), and most dates are significantly later. According to Dickey (in Bent 1946) the incubation period for this species is 11 days. This would mean that the *earliest* hatching date would be 23 April. We have stub-tailed nestling specimens from western Pennsylvania taken 9 June and from coastal Virginia taken 23 May. It would appear unlikely on the face of it that a Carolina Chickadee juvenile would be old enough and strong enough to fly across Lake Erie and arrive at Long Point by 18 May. There is further evidence from the specimen itself. Although the label is annotated "SNCO" (skull not completely "ossified" or pneumatized), a sign of immaturity, the skull in the specimen is mostly rigid to the touch. Posteriorly it has some "give", and I suspect that the skull was partly crushed, possibly in the net. In any case, the cranium of a chickadee only a month old would show hardly any pneumatization at all, and would not feel hard, as this one does. Additional evidence that this bird was not a juvenile lies in the condition of the flight feathers. The remiges and the rectrices are very worn (the latter to the extent that only a minimum tail measurement is possible), far more than would be true of a chickadee a month after hatching. A third piece

of morphological evidence lies in the label description of the ovary as having measured 3 x 2mm. An ovary of only 3 x 2mm on 18 May suggests that this bird would not have come into breeding condition that year, but not that it was a juvenile. The ovary of a month-old female chickadee would be expected to be a tiny, barely perceptible blob of tissue.

In short, then, all of the evidence indicates that ROM no. 28494, Canada's first Carolina Chickadee specimen, represents a non-breeding adult female of the northern subspecies *Parus carolinensis exlimus*.

There remains one more peripheral "loose end". Ms Gustafson's (1987) claim that the Ontario record negates the status of the Carolina Chickadee as a US endemic bird species has no validity. "Accidentals" do not affect the concept of endemism; if they did so, then many species presently considered endemic to North America would lose that status owing to accidental records in western Europe.

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First Nest Record of White-eyed Vireo in Ontario

by

William J. Rayner

The White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*) is presently considered a rare breeding species in the Carolinian Zone of Ontario (James 1987).

Although there is an unsubstantiated nesting record from Toronto in 1898 (Macoun and Macoun 1909), the White-eyed Vireo was not confirmed as a breeding species in Ontario until 1971.

On 24 May 1971, M. A. Rayner and the author observed a White-eyed Vireo flitting nervously between bushes on either side of a moderately travelled private road, 75m west of the shoreline of Lake Erie and 2km north of the entrance to Rondeau Provincial Park, Kent Co., Ontario. We soon located a second bird of this species in the immediate area and a closer study with 10-power binoculars revealed that one vireo was carrying nesting material to a choke cherry (*Prunus*

virginiana) bush situated 1.5m from the edge of the road. Upon examination of the bush, we observed the placement of anchor strands of a nest from a fork of a branch about 1m above the ground.

On the evening of 28 May we returned to the site and found a completed, cone-shaped nest, tightly built and constructed of various materials, including twigs, pine needles, paper, grasses and string (Fig. 1). No eggs were present in the nest. The following day, M. H. Field arrived and confirmed our findings. In response to a playback of the vireo's recorded song, one of the birds began uttering a series of scolding notes not unlike the call of a nuthatch (*Sitta* sp.) but increasing in volume and intensity and lasting approximately 40 seconds.

The next morning (29 May) one of the birds was observed on the

William J. Rayner, 36 Valerie Street, St. Thomas, Ontario N5R 1A8