

Acknowledgements

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Notes

Behavioural Identification of the Wilson's Warbler

Warbler enthusiasts know only too well that many warblers, especially immatures in fall, go unidentified because they restlessly dart about or are barely visible in thick cover. The Wilson's Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*) is a very active, flitting, and often only briefly glimpsed species whose field marks are frequently not seen well enough to allow positive identification. Immatures also bear a resemblance to immature and female Yellow Warblers (*Dendroica petechia*). Fortunately, Wilson's can be easily identified by its distinctive behavioural actions.

Wilson's almost constantly flicks its wings like a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) and often flips its tail up and down or from side to side like a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*). The fidgety, kinglet-like wing flicking is usually the most

noticeable action. Especially when observed skulking in thick shrubbery or seen in poor light, Wilson's is easy to distinguish by its behaviour.

William Brewster (in Bent 1953:630-631) and Wayne R. Petersen (in Farrand 1983:180) described the wing and tail actions of the Wilson's Warbler, but they failed to emphasize how useful these actions are to its identification under typical field conditions of poor light and thick cover. I encourage others to watch for the distinctive wing and tail twitching of the Wilson's Warbler. Once you are familiar with this behaviour, you will be able to identify with ease many more Wilson's which once went unidentified.

Acknowledgements

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First Yellow-headed Blackbird Nest for Thunder Bay District

In the summer of 1988 I found one Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) nest and evidence of a second nest at Mission Island Marsh, Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay District, Ontario. This is the first recorded nest of this species in the Thunder Bay District (Flood 1987; Peck and James 1987).

Mission Island Marsh lies within the city limits of Thunder Bay at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River on Lake Superior (48°23'N 89°13'W). The marsh is approximately 40ha in area. Stands of bur-reed (*Sparganium* sp.), rush (*Scirpus* sp.), and other emergent plants and open pools are frequent in the open part of the marsh with cattails (*Typha* sp.) lining the shores.

As many as three singing male Yellow-headed Blackbirds were seen between 15 May and 18 June 1988 in a small marsh near Chippewa Park, approximately 3km south of Mission Island Marsh. No females were seen here and, despite several visits during the summer, no

evidence of nesting was found.

On 3 July 1988 I saw a female Yellow-headed Blackbird at Mission Island Marsh and, after watching her for several minutes, saw her enter a dense stand of bur-reed (*Sparganium eurycarpum*). The stand was situated approximately 20m from shore in approximately 50cm of water. I waded to the stand and flushed the female blackbird from a nest containing four eggs.

The nest was constructed of coarse grass, lined with finer grasses and feathers, and was interwoven with the stalks of the bur-reed. It was positioned approximately 30cm above the water.

On 9 July the nest contained one newly-hatched young and one egg in the process of hatching. The fate of the two missing eggs is unknown.

On 26 July no adults or young were observed in the area, and the nest had been removed. The stalks supporting the nest had been cut off near the water level, possibly by muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*) or by humans. It is not known if the

young birds fledged before the nest was removed.

A second female was seen in the same part of the marsh on 3 and 9 July. It perched with the first female several times, and made occasional forays to another stand of bur-reed. Although I was unable to find a second nest, the behaviour of the second female and the fact that this species almost invariably nests in colonies (Flood 1987) suggests that another nest was present.

Yellow-headed Blackbirds are primarily a prairie-nesting species, but have nested in Ontario and in the Rainy River District since at least 1961 (Baillie 1961) and in the marshes of Lake St. Clair (Essex Co. and Kent Co.) since at least 1965 (Sawyer and Dyer 1968). During the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas period (1981 to 1985) nesting was not confirmed outside these two counties and one district (Flood 1987).

The Thunder Bay nesting is probably a result of birds being displaced from their traditional nesting grounds in the west due to the drought of the spring and summer of 1988. Several other prairie-nesting species, including Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*), Redhead (*A. americana*), Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*), and Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), that do not normally summer at Thunder Bay, were also recorded in the summer of 1988 (N. Escott, pers. comm.).

Whether or not the same birds or their offspring will return to nest at Mission Island Marsh when weather conditions on the prairies return to normal is unknown, but this species does tend to reuse breeding sites (Peck and James 1987). This will present the opportunity to observe an expanding colony from its inception.

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Wilson's Phalarope / R. D. James

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First Record of Dickcissel *Spiza americana* in the Sudbury District

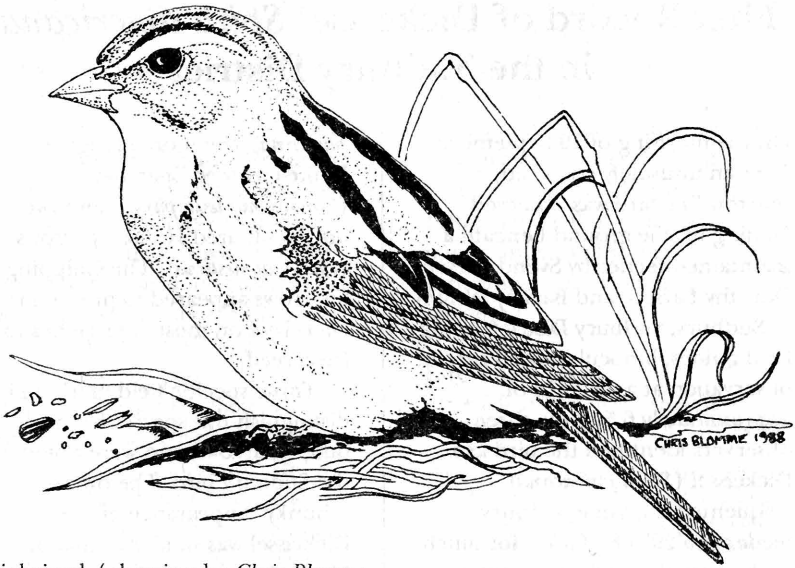
On the morning of 19 September 1988 an unusually coloured, sparrow-like bird was observed feeding on the ground beneath a maintained feeder by Svend Larsen, Dorothy Larsen, and Barney Weight in Sudbury, Sudbury District. Using field guides, binoculars, and careful observation at a distance of approximately 6.5m, the three observers identified the bird as a Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*). It frequented the same Sudbury feeder (46°29'N 81°00'W) for much of the next day and was observed and confirmed by several other members of the Sudbury Ornithological Society in the evening. On 21 September the bird was observed at 0730h for 15 minutes by the author and photographed on a return visit at 1630h. The bird was seen by the author again on 22 and 23 September. It was last observed on the evening of the 23 September by S. Larsen.

During the period when the Dickcissel was present it was observed feeding on mixed seed on the ground below the feeder and would not take seed from the covered feeder. It would frequently reappear with other sparrows when fresh seed was laid out at different periods of the day. It fed in association with smaller, immature Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella*

passerina), the more elongate White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*), and two dingy-coloured House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). The Chipping Sparrows appeared to precede the Dickcissel on most approaches to fresh seed.

Three specific field marks help distinguish this species from all other sparrows, and were noted in the Sudbury bird. The overall "chunky" appearance of the Dickcissel was similar to that of a House Sparrow. However, the presence of a distinctive yellow wash on the chest separated the Dickcissel from this species. Secondly, two black but indistinct malar streaks ran down the sides of the throat area. Finally, the shoulder patch of the wing was a rusty red. This is usually a prominent field mark, however this shoulder patch was periodically concealed by overlapping feathers during rest periods. Other features noted in the Sudbury bird were grey cheeks and grey, lightly-streaked crown, white throat, and distinctively streaked back.

James *et al.* (1976) indicate that the Dickcissel is generally considered to be of sporadic occurrence in Ontario. The majority of records are concentrated in southwestern Ontario, particularly in counties



Dickcissel / drawing by *Chris Blomme*

bordering the north shore of Lake Erie (Godfrey 1986; Eagles 1987). Weir (1987a) reported that there were usually two records per autumn for this species in Ontario in recent years. Recent summer records of Dickcissel appear to be even more scarce, with no records for 1987 (Weir 1987b) and one record for 1986, that of a male at Inverary, near Kingston, Frontenac Co. (Weir 1986).

Northern Ontario records of Dickcissel are fewer, with records cited from Fort Albany, Cochrane District (Goodwin 1982), Marathon, Thunder Bay District (Goodwin 1980a; Speirs 1985), Batchawana Point, Lake Superior, Algoma District (Goodwin 1980b), and Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay District (James *et al.* 1976). In

Manitoulin District (situated due west of Sudbury District) there are two records of male Dickcissels, both seen in May (Nicholson 1981).

This sighting constitutes the first known record of the Dickcissel in Sudbury District.

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Western Kingbird Nesting in Rainy River District

The Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) is a rare spring and fall visitor to southern Ontario. Breeding across much of western Canada and the United States, and as far east as the mid-western states, it is considered a rare nester in Michigan and eastern Manitoba (Bent 1942).

Only recently has the Western Kingbird been confirmed as a breeding species in Ontario. Peck and James (1987) and Speirs (1985) report a nest containing three eggs (supported by photographic evidence [ROM PR 349 & 350]) found in Kent County on 26 June 1943 by C. J. MacFayden. However, no description of the parents is available, and the photographs of the nest and eggs are not diagnostic.

On 9 June 1987, D. H. Elder and T. J. Nash reported finding an active nest, containing at least two young, in Worthington Township,

Rainy River District (Weir 1987). This record was accepted as the first confirmed nesting of the species in Ontario.

Additional Ontario sightings of summering or potentially breeding birds include: (1) three birds found in Rainy River District, 6-14 July 1983, by B. Jones, L. Fazio, J. Heslop, and D. H. Elder, with two of the birds identified as females and one as a male, and (2) a Western Kingbird found in suitable nesting habitat by W. Crins and R. Ridout on 26 May 1981 in Rainy River District, 20km south of the above sighting. No evidence of breeding was noted in either case (Carpentier 1987).

On 3 June 1988, G. Carpentier, R. Smith, B. Charlton, and N. Barrett discovered a pair of adult Western Kingbirds in Worthington Township, Rainy River District. On 4 June Carpentier discovered a Western Kingbird nest located about 6m up in a large Manitoba

Maple (*Acer negundo*).

The nest was constructed of coarse grasses and fine twigs, loosely woven into a "messy" elongate structure, and situated near the confluence of a major vertical branch and the main trunk of the tree. Considerable foreign matter, of paper-like quality, was woven into the structure of the nest in the median section. The nest was generally untidy, and several strands of grass dangled from its base. It appeared that the lowest portions of the nest were well weathered, and it seemed that the nest was actually constructed on top of a previous one, although this was never confirmed.

At no time were the adults seen to incubate, but actions by one of the pair implied that the nest was still under construction, although obviously in the late stages. A kingbird observed on the nest on 4 June appeared to be shaping the cup of the nest with its body. Neither adult was seen carrying nest material to the site during the observations. The adults frequently emitted soft alarm calls while the observers were present.

The contents of the nest were not checked so as to reduce disturbance and the possibility of an abandonment. During the course of the observation period (3–6 June 1988), the adults were noted attending the nest for two brief periods, but they generally remained in the immediate vicinity of the nest and nest site for 15 to 20

minutes at a time.

The nest site and basic construction were consistent with descriptions contained in Harrison (1978) with respect to location on the tree, height above the ground, the presence of paper materials and grasses in its construction, and its loosely woven, untidy appearance.

It is the opinion of the observers that this constitutes the second confirmed nesting of the Western Kingbird in Ontario.

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Short-eared Owl and Red-tailed Hawk Attempt to Rob Northern Harrier

On 19 March 1989 at 1715h we saw three raptors circling over open fields about 1km south of Hagersville, Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk, Ontario. The two highest were an adult male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) and a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*).

As we watched, the owl twice closed on the rising harrier and dived at it. The harrier was carrying a mouse and several strands of grass in its left foot but did not relinquish this prey. As this happened, a small adult Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) flapped and circled below the two higher birds but gained altitude steadily.

After about two minutes, the Short-eared Owl left and the Red-tailed Hawk began flying with steady wingbeats towards the harrier. The harrier flew quickly to the northwest for about 0.5km with the Red-tailed Hawk pursuing, but not gaining distance. Within 30 seconds, the Red-tailed Hawk broke off the chase and glided back to the southeast.

The harrier glided down, perched on the ground at the edge of an ice-covered quarry, and looked about, all the while holding the mouse.

Piracy is common among raptors (Palmer 1988:298), with Northern Harriers frequently involved as the attackers (Watson 1977:93). Palmer

(1988:128) notes that the Red-tailed Hawks occasionally rob other species such as Northern Harriers. Bildstein (1987) observes that harriers are more frequently robbed by Rough-legged Hawks (*Buteo lagopus*) to the extent that they often do not hunt in areas frequented by that species.

Usually, Short-eared Owls are the victims of piracy by Northern Harriers (Berger 1958; Clark 1975; Watson 1977) but, on occasion, they have been reported robbing prey of Northern Harriers (Palmer 1988:298).

Bent (1937) notes the only other case of a Northern Harrier being involved in a three-species act of piracy. A Northern Harrier carrying a mouse was pursued closely by three American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*); it dropped the mouse. The leading crow snatched it up, only to be chased by a Crested Caracara (*Polyborus plancus*). The crow dropped the dead mouse, which landed so close to the observer that the caracara perched nearby, reluctant to retrieve it.

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Book Reviews

Nothing Gold Can Stay; The Wildlife of Upper Canada. By W. Fraser Sandercombe. The Boston Mills Press, Erin, Ontario. 188pp. (\$19.95)

A while ago I was reading the diary of Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Ontario's first Lieutenant-Governor (1792-1796), and was fascinated by the numerous, interesting natural history references. I thought it would be interesting to go through her diary and other similar sources and try to compose a picture of what the landscape of Upper Canada looked like, before development so fundamentally changed it. Accordingly, I was delighted soon after to hear that a new book, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, had precisely that as its purpose. To quote from the introduction, it "is about how the land was when the settlers arrived, how they used it and abused it, added to it, took away from it". Sounds great, eh? Unfortunately, the book falls considerably short of the mark.

It is sub-divided into a variety of thematic chapters such as birds, hunting, fish and fishing, etc. Many

are given evocative and/or poetic titles ("None Gets Out Alive" for the chapter on squirrels and hares; "Trophy Meat" for the chapter on ungulates, etc.). In each the author selects passages from a variety of well-known pioneer writers and observers, including Catharine Parr Traill, Phillip H. Goss (who wrote about *Lower Canada*, by the way), Henry Scadding, Suzanna Moodie, etc. With each subject area there is an editorial by the author, summarizing the situation or expounding his views on the matter. Many beautifully executed pen and ink sketches of the animals and situations discussed are distributed through the text.

It is, ironically, the graphic and artistic success of *Nothing Gold Can Stay* — and it is a truly beautifully illustrated and crafted package — that points towards its major failing. Not nearly enough attention was paid to what went *into* this pretty