Notes

Breeding Habitat of the Connecticut Warbler in the Rainy River District

by
David H. Elder

The Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) breeding range in Canada extends from west-central Quebec in the east, across north-central Ontario, central Manitoba, central Saskatchewan, central Alberta to east-central British Columbia. In Ontario, it can be found north of Georgian Bay to southern James Bay, right across the province.

Generally, two distinct types of habitat are utilized in the species' Canadian range. In the eastern and central parts, black spruce (*Picea mariana*) and tamarack (*Larix laricina*) bogs are preferred although some localized use of immature jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*) stands does occur. In the west, open trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) woods constitute the primary habitat. Within Ontario, both types of habitat are used, with the black spruce and tamarack bog type predominating.

It is within the Rainy River District in Northwestern Ontario that both types of habitats are utilized. The Rainy River District extends from about 65 km east of the town of Atikokan to the Lake of the Woods. The eastern two thirds of the District is located on the Canadian Shield and has vegetation characteristics that are predominantly boreal. The forest cover is largely conifer with stands of jack pine occupying the drier sites and black spruce in the moister areas. Trembling aspen stands are scattered throughout, and poorly drained areas are covered with black spruce and some tamarack. It is these poorly drained boggy areas which the Connecticut Warbler frequents for breeding.

West of Fort Frances, the land is flat and there is little evidence of the Canadian Shield, which has angled to the northwest. Farming country replaces the boreal forests and woodland consists of stands of trembling aspen peppered with a few balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*), black spruce and white spruce (*P. glauca*). Here and there throughout the area are large peat bogs that may be quite open or may be covered with a stand of mature black spruce. In contrast to the eastern part of the District, Connecticut Warblers generally avoid the bog areas and occupy the trembling aspen woods.

Figure 1 shows a typical black spruce bog favoured as a breeding site in the eastern part of the District. Preference is shown for bogs that consist of fairly open immature or stunted stands of black spruce. Connecticut Warblers avoid stands of thick, mature black spruce. Ground cover in the open bogs consists of various species of sphagnum mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.), Labrador tea (*Ledum*

Figure 1: Typical open black spruce bog in the eastern part of the Rainy River District. Photo by *David H. Elder.*

groenlandicum), bog rosemary (*Andromeda glaucophylla*), bog laurel (*Kalmia polifolia*), and leatherleaf (*Chamaedaphne calyculata*). Breeding males announce their presence by singing loudly from a perch part way up a black spruce. They can be very difficult to see and are often quite wary, leaving the tree long before an observer can approach closely.

Figure 2 illustrates the trembling aspen woods occupied in the western section of the Rainy River District. The woods are fairly open and have an understorey of dogwood (*Cornus* spp.), alder (*Alnus* spp.) and other scattered shrubs. Singing male Connecticut Warblers select a perch well up in an aspen, often right within the canopy. Their colours match perfectly those of the aspen foliage and considerable effort is necessary to see the bird. In contrast with the birds found in the spruce bogs, the singers in the aspens are very confiding and do not vacate their perch at the first sign of an observer. Thus, with a little patience and manoeuvring, a good view of the bird can usually be obtained.

Comparisons of the two types of Connecticut Warbler habitat are thus available to the interested observer within 160 km of each other in the Rainy River District. Interestingly enough, a confirmed nest with eggs or young of the Connecticut Warbler has yet to be found and documented in Ontario.

Figure 2: Typical aspen woods in the western part of the Rainy River District. Photo by *David H. Elder.*

Literature cited

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Two Incidents of Great Blue Heron Feeding on Birds

by Rob Dobos

It is widely known that the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) feeds mainly on aquatic animals such as fish, amphibians and crustaceans, and that its diet may occasionally include reptiles, small mammals and birds (Bent 1926). This report describes two unusual incidents of a Great Blue Heron feeding on birds.

The first observation, by Christine Bishop, William Crins, Kathleen Gardiner, William Lamond, Brian McHattie, Kevin McLaughlin, plus the author, occurred on 8 September 1990, at the mouth of Grindstone Creek, where it flows into the west end of Hamilton Harbour (area known as Valley Inn), in the City of Hamilton, Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth. Several hundred birds, including numerous waterfowl, shorebirds, and gulls, and several Great Blue Herons were observed foraging at the mudflats and shallow waters at this site.

As we scanned the birds, we had noticed that one of the Great Blue Herons was attempting to devour a large object which appeared to be a small duck. The duck was identified as a male Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*), and was apparently still alive, as it weakly flapped its wings several times during the observation. We watched for about one half hour as the heron repeatedly attempted to swallow the duck, but could not get the teal's entire body down its throat. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, the duck was dropped onto the mudflat. The heron aggressively defended its potential meal from the other herons present, as it chased away a bird which approached too closely on a few occasions.

We did not observe the heron, which was identified as an adult bird, initially attack the teal; therefore, it is not known if the duck was sick or injured. We also did not remain long enough to ascertain if the heron was finally successful in making a meal of the teal. This would seem very unlikely, considering the difficulty the heron was having during our observation.

The second observation occurred one week later on 15 September 1990 at Windermere Basin, at the east end of Hamilton Harbour, in the City of Hamilton. Barbara Charlton, Robert Curry and the author observed, while viewing the many shorebirds present in the southwest pond of Windermere, an adult Great Blue Heron attempting to swallow a large shorebird which it held in its bill. The shorebird was evidently a yellowlegs (*Tringa* sp.), as long straw-yellow legs and a longish, straight bill dangled from the heron's mouth; however, the species could not be positively determined.

The heron repeatedly shook the yellowlegs while it was held in its bill, and tossed its head backwards, attempting to get the shorebird headfirst down its throat. However, the long legs and bill appeared to be giving the heron much difficulty in swallowing. We watched this episode

for several minutes, then returned our attention to the many shorebirds present. The heron was eventually seen to fly out of the pond; however, we did not know if it was successful in devouring the shorebird. While the heron held the shorebird in its bill, it appeared that the yellowlegs was lifeless. However, we did not know whether it had been a healthy or injured bird attacked by the heron, or a dead bird that was being scavenged.

It is interesting to note that a Great Blue Heron was observed to successfully devour a Lesser Yellowlegs (*T. flavipes*) at the same site on 25 September 1987 (Kubisz 1989). The observer believed that the heron, which was a hatch-year bird, had scavenged the shorebird, rather than killing it itself. In light of the similarity of the 1987 observation to the more recent incidents (especially the one at Windermere Basin), it would be interesting to speculate that the same individual heron may have been involved in these three observations. This would be impossible to prove since no distinguishing features were observed to be able to identify the herons as the same bird. The ages of the herons observed certainly fit this speculation (a hatch-year bird in 1987, both adults in 1990). The two sites, Valley Inn and Windermere Basin, are within 10 km of each other, a distance which could easily be covered by a foraging Great Blue Heron. It seems somewhat more probable that an individual Great Blue Heron would develop the unusual feeding habit of preying on large sick birds or scavenging on dead birds, rather than two or three birds within an area developing this feeding strategy. In any event, the above observations are of interest in themselves.

Literature cited

Bent, A.C. 1926. Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds. United States National Museum Bulletin 135, Washington, D.C.

Kubisz, M. 1989. Unusual feeding behaviour of the Great Blue Heron. Ontario Birds 7: 111-112.

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The Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program

by
Harry G. Lumsden

The restoration program is back on track and four cygnets were flying free at Wye Marsh this fall. Another seven will be released there next spring after breakup. Three of the cygnets released last spring have been flying round the general area since late summer. They left Wye Marsh on 10 December 1991 and were seen on Kempenfelt Bay near Barrie.

There are eight free-flying Trumpeters on the north-west shore of Lake Ontario. Two of these birds have lost their patagium tags. They are now nearly six years old. They carry USFWS bands, the numbers of which can be read when the birds are out of the water. All of the other released birds carry two or three digit patagium tags. There are also a few Mute Swans carrying patagium tags.

Occasionally, Trumpeters from the restoration programs in Minnesota move south-east. There are at least two records of neck-collared Trumpeters seen in the Atlantic flyway which may have crossed Ontario. There are other observations of unmarked Trumpeters in Ontario, Ohio, and New York which probably originated in the upper Mississippi Flyway. We can expect the Trumpeter Swan to occur with increasing frequency in Ontario, and it would be important to document change in status.

It would be greatly appreciated if members of OFO could report sightings of Trumpeters to the records committee, and those of marked swans to Harry G. Lumsden, 144 Hillview Road, Aurora, Ontario L4G 2M5 (416-727-6492), or to any OMNR office.

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