

FIRST RECORD OF SWAINSON'S WARBLER
(Limnothlypis swainsonii) IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Blair Nikula, Chatham

On the afternoon of May 4, 1982, John Young of Truro observed a bird in Beech Forest in Provincetown that he identified as a Swainson's Warbler. He notified Wallace Bailey at the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary and gave an accurate and convincing description. Early the following morning, after searching the general area of the sighting for about half an hour, Wallace Bailey, Carl Goodrich, and I heard the bird sing several times and shortly afterward had several good looks, confirming the original identification. Several other observers were successful in finding the bird later that day and again the following day, May 6. It could not be found on the seventh or subsequently. The writer was able to obtain a poor quality but identifiable photograph on May 5 that is on file at Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Description. This bird was a large, drab, and rather sluggish warbler. The back, wings, and tail were a plain, unmarked olive-brown. The throat, cheeks, breast and belly were pale buff, darkening slightly to gray-buff on the flanks and sides of the breast. A thin black line extended from the base of the bill through the eye. A broader, pale buff line extended from the forehead back, above the black eyeline, setting off a solid rusty cap. The bill was large and blackish, paling to a light pink at the base of the lower mandible. The legs and feet were pinkish.

The bird spent most of its time on the ground at or near the edge of a small freshwater pool, rummaging through the leaf litter, only occasionally hopping up to small branches one to three feet above the ground. At times it was totally out of sight, and its location could only be determined by the rustling of the leaves. Fortunately for those searching for it, the bird apparently never wandered more than fifty feet or so from the small pool where it was originally discovered. Nevertheless, when not singing, its quiet and rather sluggish habits made it extremely difficult to locate. Although secretive in its habits, the bird did not seem particularly shy or wary, allowing patient observers to approach to within fifteen feet or less.

The song, heard most frequently in the early morning, was loud and clear and consisted of two or three slurred introductory notes followed by three or four rapid notes of varying pitches, most closely resembling a Louisiana Waterthrush. Typically, the song was given several times in succession followed by rather long periods, fifteen to thirty minutes or more, of silence. Attempts to elicit a response with a tape recorder were totally unsuccessful and may even have had a negative effect.

Swainson's Warblers nest in the southeastern United States north to southern Ohio, West Virginia, southern Virginia, and southeastern Maryland. Vagrants occasionally wander north of the breeding range in the spring and have been recorded as far north as the New York City area on at least nine occasions, six in the last decade. Although there is an unconfirmed sight record from Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, the Provincetown bird represents the first documented record from Massachusetts and apparently the first for New England. However, in light of the species' regular occurrence in New York in recent years, its appearance here was not unexpected.

REFERENCES

- Post, P.W. 1980. Photos of New York State Rarities. Kingbird. 30:3, 134-137.
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WHAT A CRAZY BIRD! THE PURPLE GALLINULE

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Brookline

"Hurry up! He's walking on your car!" And so he was. Within the next few minutes, I scabbled for my camera, focused wildly, and photographed a Purple Gallinule walking delicately on the hood of a car in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

The Hurwitch family had reported to Dick Forster of Massachusetts Audubon that a strange and beautiful bird had been feeding often in the tall grass of their backyard since mid-May. From their description, Dick told them it must be a Purple Gallinule. At Forster's suggestion, I telephoned the family on a weekend that I was visiting a friend in the area and received permission to come by to confirm the identification.

Thus, early on a rainy Sunday morning, May 30, I parked quietly in the Hurwitch driveway but hesitated to walk into the backyard because no one seemed to be stirring. Instead, I strolled around the neighborhood hoping I was not trespassing - the area is closely packed with homes, gardens, fences, and formidable hedges - without sighting any rare birds or even glimpsing any place that seemed a likely habitat for a rail although I knew there was a large pond nearby. I was returning to my car when I heard Barbara Hurwitch calling me and was very lucky indeed to snap three hurried pictures only moments before the bird flew to the top of a dense hedge about ten feet high and dropped out of sight. Barbara told me that the gallinule came into their yard daily at irregular intervals and fed on seeds in the tall grass of the lawn, creating a problem with mowing it. To avoid harming or alarming this lovely creature, they had carefully "cut the grass only a little bit at a time" after searching