

PROBABLE NESTING OF YELLOW-BREASTED CHATS IN SANDWICH

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On 1 June 1973 a pair of Yellow-breasted Chats (*Icteria virens*) were mist-netted and banded at the Scusset Beach State Reservation in northern Sandwich, Barnstable County. Both individuals were adults in alternate (breeding) plumage.

The occurrence of the chat as a breeding species in Massachusetts historically has been sporadic (Forbush, 1929; Bagg & Eliot, 1937; Griscom & Snyder, 1955; Bailey, 1955), and in the most recent treatment of the avifauna of Cape Cod, Hill (1965) states that during spring and summer chats are "very rare and erratic, may nest casually, but no satisfactory proof as yet."

The Scusset birds were caught along the southwestern edge of Sagamore Hill, at a banding site that has been operated by the Manomet Bird Observatory between spring and fall from 1971 to 1973. Sagamore Hill is surrounded on three sides by an extensive fresh-water marsh largely composed of cat-tails and *Phragmites* reeds interspersed with low hillocks and ridges that support alders, sweet gale and small trees. The slopes leading down to the marsh are thinly clothed in some areas with pitch pine, scrub oak, black oak, and lowbush blueberry, while the rest are covered with dense thickets of arrowwood, shadbush, highbush blueberry, catbrier, bayberry, and sumac.

At the time of first capture, the female possessed a brood patch in an early stage of development, the skin lightly vascularized. The male's cloacal protuberance was not noticeably enlarged. In three subsequent visits to the site (7 & 8, 21 & 22, 28 & 29 June) the male was frequently heard singing in the thickets, but only rarely was seen due to the density of cover. A search for a nest proved fruitless.

On 5 July the female was again mist-netted, and both birds were caught on the following day. This time the male possessed a swollen cloacal protuberance, and the female's brood patch was moderately vascularized and edematous, a condition which in songbirds normally indicates that egg-laying is complete and incubation is in progress or about to begin. The male was heard singing again on 12 July, but neither bird was found after that date, nor were any young seen.

I believe that the data can best be interpreted as follows: by 1 June the pair probably had completed nest building and were about to lay eggs. This first nesting was unsuccessful, perhaps due to the unseasonably cool and wet weather during June. The pair attempted to nest again, and by 5 July had laid the second clutch of eggs. The outcome of the second nesting is unknown.

I base my interpretations of two critical data. 1) The weight of the female on 1 June was 28.9 g., an unusually high weight for a female chat not having fat. On 5 and 6 July she weighed 23.8 g. and 22.4 g., indicating that on 1 June she had an egg in the oviduct and was in the process of laying the first clutch, whereas by 5 July she had laid the second clutch. 2) The 34 days between captures is too short a time for the chats to have laid eggs, incubated, raised young to fledging, redeveloped brood patch, and laid another clutch by 5 July. Therefore I feel that the first nesting was a failure.

Due to the comparatively retiring nature of most chats during the breeding season, its current status as a breeder is not well known; it is hoped that Massachusetts Audubon's Breeding Bird Census will provide new and more comprehensive field data.

References

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