SECOND MASSACHUSETTS RECORD OF HERMIT WARBLER

by Curtis A. Marantz and Dianne Quilty

About midday on November 19, 1995, Quilty noticed an unusual warbler frequenting the feeders on the back porch of her home in Amherst, Massachusetts. Although similar to a Black-throated Green Warbler *(Dendroica virens)* in many respects, the bird did not look quite right for that species: the back was more gray than olive, there was no yellow on the breast or vent or blackish streaking on the sides of the breast, and the cheek patch was "smudgy" and almost indistinguishable from the balance of the ear-coverts. During its brief visit to the porch, the bird seemed sluggish or weary, holding its wings low. Later that afternoon, the bird was observed again, this time apparently eating black-oil sunflower seeds from a platform feeder on the floor of the deck. The last observation of the bird on this day was near dusk, when it arrived with a flock of Black-capped Chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*) and American Goldfinches (*Carduelis tristis*). Although the bird again stayed low on the deck, it searched more actively for shelled seeds on this visit.

During the next three days, Quilty observed the warbler consistently from just before dawn through 7:00 a.m., and again from about 4:30 p.m. through dusk. The bird would arrive with a flock of chickadees and search through most of the available feeders for seeds. Although suet was available on the deck, it is unknown whether the bird took any. The bird also seemed to become less wary as the week progressed. It was observed perched on top of the porch railing and in a nearby apple tree, and when it foraged on the ground. While foraging on the ground, the bird sometimes fanned its tail like an American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*). On occasion, it even came to the deck when Quilty was filling the feeders.

Still unsure about the bird's identity after referring to Curson et al (1994), Quilty called Janet Ortiz and Scott Surner on November 22 for help in identifying the warbler. Surner alerted Marantz to the bird's presence on the same day. Upon arriving at Quilty's home at 7:10 the next morning, Marantz and Surner were informed that the bird had already visited the feeder twice. Shortly thereafter, the warbler returned to the feeding station with a small flock of chickadees, and Quilty, Marantz, and Surner observed it for a minute or two before it flew off to the nearby trees.

At this point, Marantz concluded that the bird in question was a Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*), a species that had been known to occur only once previously in Massachusetts. During the hour-long visit by Marantz and Surner to Quilty's home, the warbler made three visits to the feeders on the porch, allowing stunning views from a distance of a meter or less. Surner and Marantz also managed to take a few photographs of the bird. Arriving somewhat later than the others, Ortiz managed to see the bird during its two final visits to the feeder.

After permission had been obtained from nearby property owners, and an easily accessible viewing spot had been found behind the Fort River School, word of the sighting was spread rapidly. In fact, Marantz had received a phone call about the bird before he arrived home, just a half-hour later! Unfortunately, despite its regular visits to Quilty's feeders prior to its identification, the bird became progressively more difficult to locate during the days that followed. Following the observations on the morning of November 23, the bird was seen a few times during the remainder of the day. On November 24, however, the Hermit Warbler was not seen after approximately 9:50 a.m., despite being searched for during much of the rest of the day. Finally, a small group of observers saw the bird for a minute or two at about 8:30 a.m. on November 25, after which it was never seen again.

Over a total of about five minutes of observation during the bird's three visits to the feeder on the morning of November 23, Marantz was able to note the following details about the Amherst Hermit Warbler. The bird looked superficially like a Black-throated Green Warbler because of its combination of a bright-yellow face, whitish underparts, dark upperparts, and bold, white wingbars. This was a medium-sized warbler with a relatively slim body. In direct comparison, the warbler was approximately two-thirds the length of an American Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*), but unlike the sparrow, the warbler had a slim, medium-length bill that was black in color and finely tipped. The most striking aspect of the bird's plumage was the extensively lemon-yellow face, which encompassed the forehead and the superciliary and malar regions and extended back behind the auriculars. The yellow forehead blended into a

Hermit Warbler, Amherst, MA, 23 November, 1995 *Photograph by S. Surner*

medium-olive-gray forecrown. The contrast between the dark crown and the yellow supercilium was striking and sharply defined. A dingy ear-patch was barely discernable against the plain yellow of the face; it was really only evident as a blurry, lower border to the auriculars that ended in a dull spot at their rear corner. The impression created was of a "blank-faced" appearance, with the only real contrast on the face being that between the face itself and the dark eye.

The crown, nape, mantle, and scapulars were a medium-gray color with a slight olive cast. Several faint, blurry streaks were evident on the back. Only minimal contrast was evident between the back and wings, the latter being dark gray in color and displaying two bold, white wingbars. The tail was relatively long, and slim throughout its length; it was basically dark except for the outer two pairs of rectrices, which, when seen as the bird flew away from us, appeared to be extensively tipped with white. The underparts were pale and unmarked. The yellow of the malar region extended onto the bird's chin, but this yellow was limited, blending almost immediately into a dull, whitish throat. There were no blackish or even dusky markings on the throat, the sides of the breast, or the flanks. Despite the presence of a faint buffy cast immediately around the vent, this bird clearly lacked the bright-yellow wash that wraps around from the rump onto the sides of the vent on a Black-throated Green Warbler. The feet and legs were blackish.

A review of available identification guides (Scott 1983, Curson et al 1994) by all four observers highlighted several discrepancies between their experience with Hermit Warblers and the published descriptions. Hermit Warblers are distinctive for a number of reasons. First, they have bright-yellow faces with only a hint of a dark auricular-border (which is noticeably less apparent than that of a Black-throated Green Warbler, despite implications to the contrary by Curson et al 1994). For the most part, Hermit Warblers in all plumages look remarkably plain-faced. Equally distinctive is the back, which, although it may have an olive cast, basically appears gray from a moderate distance, and it does not come close to approaching the bright-green back of a Black-throated Green Warbler. Additional marks are the lack of yellow at the sides of the vent (this yellow can be quite striking on a Black-throated Green Warbler), and the lack of both a dark eye-line and dusky streaking on the flanks. Once the Amherst bird was identified as a Hermit Warbler, we concluded, based on the complete lack of duskiness on the throat and the faint olive cast to the upperparts, that it was probably an immature female.

In addition to possible confusion with Black-throated Green Warblers, another factor to keep in mind when reporting either Hermit or Townsend's (*D. townsendi*) warblers out of range is the possibility of Hermit x Townsend's hybrids. It has been suggested that most individuals of both these species in the state of Washington show some indications of hybridization (Jaramillo 1995). It is possible that individuals from this area, which represents the extreme northern limit of the Hermit Warbler's range, are disproportionately likely to turn up

extralimitally as vagrants. Just such a hybrid was photographed at Plum Point, Newfoundland, on May 23, 1995 (Jaramillo 1995). Furthermore, hybrids may be more likely than pure Hermit Warblers to turn up as long-distance vargrants due to the genetic influence of the more highly migratory Townsend's Warbler (M.A. Patten, pers. comm.). The identification of hybrids has been treated by both Scott (1983) and Curson et al (1994). In simplistic terms, any suspected Townsend's Warbler that lacks either yellow on the breast or a dark auricular-patch is likely to be a hybrid. Similarly, any apparent Hermit Warbler that either has a yellow breast or a dark auricular-patch could be a hybrid as well. To illustrate the potential for confusion, the photograph of an immature female Townsend's Warbler in a recently published field guide (Stokes and Stokes 1994, p. 406) appears to show just such a hybrid.

The Amherst Hermit Warbler record represents only the second for Massachusetts and one of a very few for eastern North America. The previous Massachusetts record pertained to a singing male seen by many observers at Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, on May 23, 1964 (Veit and Petersen 1993, Petersen 1995). Additional reports from the northeastern United States involve a singing male in New Haven, Connecticut, May 1-2, 1977 (*American Birds* 31:976; *Connecticut Warbler* 7:49-50), and a bird observed in the Myannis River Gorge, New York, on November 22, 1975. Based on the former sight record, Zeranski and Baptist (1990) considered the Hermit Warbler to be of hypothetical occurrence in Connecticut. Likewise, despite being seen by an experienced observer, the New York bird is best considered hypothetical given that it could not be relocated and was identified exclusively by the combination of gray back and plain, yellow face (*American Birds* 30:39-46). Unlike the Amherst and New York birds, the Cambridge and Connecticut records fit in with a pattern of spring occurrences of Hermit Warblers in eastern Canada. Of ten records from Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland, only three occurred during fall or winter (Jaramillo 1995); the rest were seen between April 30 and June 4.

Although Jaramillo suggests that the species is most likely to appear in eastern Canada during the spring, when birds are moving in a northerly direction to their breeding grounds, we believe that the Hermit Warbler's occurrence patterns may actually match more closely those of Townsend's Warbler, a species in which most eastern records involve fall stragglers. For Townsend's Warbler, Jaramillo suggests that birds are simply overlooked during the fall throughout much of eastern Canada. We believe that it would be even more plausible that Hermit Warblers are overlooked in the fall, when they appear far more similar to Black-throated Green Warblers than do Townsend's Warblers. For this reason, we suggest that observers in the northeastern portion of the continent carefully study fall-migrant Black-throated Green Warblers, giving special attention to those birds seen in late autumn. Of the thirteen fall

records for Townsend's Warbler in eastern Canada, only two were seen during September, whereas six were found during November (with three of these in the second half of the month), and four more were discovered in December. Similarly, of the three fall records for Hermit Warblers in this region, only one was seen in September (September 10, 1978, in Bath, Ontario), while the other two were found in late fall and winter (November 11-13, Blackhead, Newfoundland, and December 7, 1994-January 27, 1995, Green Bay, Nova Scotia) (Jaramillo 1995).

We wish to thank Christopher Pickering, of W. S. Pickering and Son, for granting birders access to private property to view the Amherst Hermit Warbler. Janet Ortiz made arrangements for observers to view the bird from the Fort River School. Michael A. Patten, Simon A. Perkins, Donald E. Kroodsma, and Scott Surner provided many useful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Tom W. Burke assisted us in tracking details of the New York Hermit Warbler record.

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Curtis Marantz is completing a Ph.D. in Biology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he is studying with Donald Kroodsma. Presently in Brazil, Marantz is conducting research on geographical variation in the songs of lowland, rain forest birds, with a particular emphasis on woodcreepers. He has done field research in Louisiana, Bolivia, Peru, and Costa Rica, as well as Brazil, but admits he is still "pretty fanatical" about the California State list that he began building as a teenager.

Diane Quilty lives in Amherst, MA, and is the Membership Secretary of the Hampshire Bird Club. A birder for about seven years, she has a particular fondness for shorebirds but describes herself as "obsessed" by birds in general. When the next rarity turns up on her porch, she'll be ready for it.

EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH

Annual Meeting

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will hold its annual meeting on Friday, September 5, at Drumlin Farm in Lincoln. This year's guest speaker is Dr. Reuven Josef, Director of the International Birding Center in Eilat, Israel. Dr. Josef is an accomplished field expert and has published a number of articles and papers on hawk migration, including a recent essay in Natural History's special Raptor Migration Issue. He will be speaking on hawk migration through Israel, the second largest known corridor for hawk migration in the world, and share some insights into raptor population trends in Eurasia. The meeting will be held at the Nature Center of Massachusetts Audubon Society's Drumlin Farm Sanctuary in Lincoln. Doors open at 6:30 for a social hour with refreshments, and the meeting will begin at 7:30. The public is invited, free of charge. For more information, call 617-483-4263.

Volunteer Hawkwatchers Sought

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW) seeks volunteers to hawk watch this fall. You don't have to be an identification "expert" to participate; the best way to learn to identify hawks is to look for them as often as possible during migration. We need volunteers to hawk watch from well-known sites such as Mt. Watatic, Bolton Flats, and Wachusett Mountain, especially on weekdays, or from any location you'd like to cover, including your own backyard. Reporting the volume of migrating hawks is more important than identifying them all by species. For more information on participating in a hawk watch, or on submitting reports of what you see, contact Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155 ; telephone 617-483-4263 after 7 p.m.

EMHW Information Available

If you are not a member of the East Massachusetts Hawk Watch and would like to receive a copy of the Fall 1996 EMHW Report, as well as complete information on the Fall 1997 watch, fliers on "Where and When to Watch Hawks in Eastern Massachusetts," and a "Guide to Books on Hawks," please write Paul Roberts at the address given above and enclose a check for $2 (made out to "EMHW") to help defray costs.

(Announcement)