

# FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE \_\_\_

## Foraging Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Early in the afternoon of April 15, 1997, I observed a male Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) at close range for about half an hour as it fed in a strip of early successional habitat (gray birch and aspen saplings) along the edge of a grassy field in the Great Meadow area in East Lexington, Massachusetts. I watched the bird for about half an hour (for part of this time, I was stationary and munching a turkey sandwich). During this time, the bird ranged over an area perhaps seventy-five feet by thirty feet. It was rarely more than five feet above the ground, or less than two, perching mainly on the lower branches of saplings six to ten feet in height. It generally remained on the margin of the wooded area.

Insect life was abundant, but on closer examination it seemed that only a few species may have been present. A bee-like fly was hovering and darting abruptly a few feet over the ground in open areas. Small, pale moths (apparently all of the same type) were fluttering among the grass and saplings. A few larger moths, apparently representing two or three species, were flying here and there. When I examined the twigs and leaves of the types of saplings the gnatcatcher was in, I couldn't find any insects.

It is no surprise that, as far as I could tell, the gnatcatcher was eating moths, mostly the small ones, which were fairly common and appeared to be easy targets for the bird's brief aerial sorties. I was able to see the bird's prey in its beak several times after the bird had landed but before it had swallowed. The gnatcatcher totally ignored the bee-like fly, but it took at least a couple of larger moths while I was watching. On one occasion, the gnatcatcher caught a moth that was so big that it broke away after a few seconds of frantic flapping, leaving a flake of wing visible in the gnatcatcher's bill.

The bird's foraging involved frequent short relocation flights, often taking place directly after a capture. After snagging a moth, it would fly to another sapling and flit around (or preen, on a couple of occasions) until another moth presented itself. Launching on a short sally-flight, the gnatcatcher would snatch its target and land immediately, usually on a different perch, but one within a few yards of its takeoff point. The process would repeat, and the bird seemed to be eating moths at the rate of two or three per minute. The bird vocalized persistently during the entire time, giving a weak, rambling warble punctuated by *bzzt* notes.

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