

## A WINTERING HERMIT WARBLER ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

by Matthew L. Pelikan

On December 21, 1997, my wife, Lori Shaller, and I took advantage of a sunny afternoon to go for a walk in the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest, near our home on Martha's Vineyard. Our intention was more to walk than to bird; however, being basically incorrigible, I steered us toward some conifers that I thought were worth checking for finches, and I brought along my binoculars.

The walking was pleasant but the birding slow (as it usually is in the State Forest in winter), and we had gone about a half-mile before we encountered any birds. As the trail dipped into a shallow valley and intersected a row of spruce trees, I heard the note of a Golden-crowned Kinglet. We paused; I "pished"; and almost instantly a warbler flew into the tree closest to us. As it flew, I could see yellow on the face with my unaided eye, and I guessed that it was a Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*), a common migrant on the Vineyard (though rare that late in the season). But as soon as I got my binoculars on this bird, I realized that it was a Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*).

I returned the following morning with Vineyard birding institution Vern Laux, and Susan Yurkus, another of the island's numerous skilled amateur naturalists. After about twenty minutes of searching, Vern located the warbler by its call note, and when the bird emerged from the foliage of a spruce tree, both Vern and Susan confirmed my identification. The word was put out, and during the ensuing weeks scores of birders (from as far away as Burlington, Vermont) were able to enjoy this intrepid little visitor.

The bird overall was small for a warbler, though noticeably larger than the kinglets it associated with. Its most striking characteristic was a surprisingly bright yellow face, with faint brownish smudging on the auriculars; the yellow coloration extended onto the forehead and down to the jaw, but the chin was white. Against the essentially unmarked yellow of the face, the black eye was conspicuous (the resulting "startled" or "wide-eyed" expression seems to be noted by virtually everyone who describes a Hermit Warbler). By the second half of February, there appeared to be a few black feather tips on the throat, though it was hard to get a good enough look at the bird to confirm this; otherwise, the underparts were white or whitish. Under some lighting conditions, faint smudging appeared to exist on the flanks, but the underparts were without streaking or strong markings of any kind (the absence of streaking on the sides of the breast, or of yellow on the breast or vent, is instrumental in ruling out Townsend's and Black-throated Green warblers). The back was gray with faint, darker streaking; when lit from certain angles, it appeared to have faint olive tones, but the ground color was unambiguously gray. The wings and tail were darker gray; there were two strong, white wing-bars. The legs and the

rather small, slightly decurved, and finely-pointed bill were black. The bird lacked any characteristics (black facial patch, streaking on the flanks, olive back, or yellow on the breast) that would indicate a Hermit x Townsend's Warbler intergrade. (See Marantz and Quilty 1997 and Dunn and Garret 1997 for succinct, up-to-date treatments of Hermit Warbler hybrids; Rohwer and Wood 1998, while primarily discussing the biological implications of Hermit x Townsend's hybridization, also outline the range of appearance presented by intergrades.) The facial coloration of the Vineyard bird appeared brighter, and the underparts less buffy, than most identification guides (e.g., Curson et al. 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997) would lead one to expect for an immature female Hermit Warbler, but the absence of black on the throat and crown, and the faintness of the streaking on the back, led most observers to conclude that this was the plumage involved.

The behavior of the Vineyard Hermit Warbler was suggestive of the habits described (Bent 1953) for this species in its usual breeding habitat. Although it was observed (and even photographed) on the ground, the bird spent the vast majority of its time fairly high up in the spruce trees; as far as I know, it was observed only once outside the limits of the spruce stand in which it was discovered (Barbara Volkle, pers. comm.). Though it was observed at various points in the spruces, including both ends of the stand, the bird was found most often in an area about 100 meters long, just north of where it was first observed; it was almost invariably associated with a flock of about fifteen Golden-crowned Kinglets. The warbler foraged almost constantly, generally starting near the tip of a branch and working its way into the tree's canopy, displaying agility that rivaled that of the kinglets as it crawled along branches and twigs. I was unable to determine what it was eating; when I examined the few spruce branches I could reach, there was no sign of any insect life on them. But sometimes I could see the warbler pull a white particle out from between the spruce needles, and I suspect it was subsisting mainly on tiny cocoons. On a few occasions, I observed it hawking flying insects in the air (a behavior noted in Dunn and Garrett 1997).

The only vocalization the bird gave was a *chip* or *tchip* note, varying from faint to fairly loud. To my ear, the note sounded exactly like the usual note of a Black-throated Green Warbler. The bird called quite frequently, mostly but not always either just before or just after it flew from one tree to another. This call note proved to be a reliable way to locate the bird.

Hermit Warblers breed in montane forest from California north into Washington and normally winter from coastal California south through western Mexico and into Central America. This species is an infrequent visitor to the Northeast. Massachusetts has had two previous confirmed records: a singing male found in Mount Auburn Cemetery, May 23, 1964 (Veit and Petersen 1993) and a first-year female at Amherst, November 19-24, 1995 (Marantz and Quilty

1997). A male Hermit Warbler was noted in New Haven, Connecticut, May 1-2, 1997 (*American Birds* 31: 976); a "persuasive description of what may have been a [female] Hermit Warbler" came from Westchester County, New York, November 22, 1975 (*American Birds* 30: 45), but the identification was never confirmed. A total of ten records from the eastern Canadian provinces are listed in Jaramillo (1995).

The salient feature of the Vineyard Hermit Warbler occurrence was the duration of the bird's visit. Jaramillo (1995) lists five records involving only a single day and four records spanning from two to five days. The Amherst, Massachusetts, bird, which fed from a bird feeder, was present for about five days (Marantz and Quilty 1997), while the other reports from New York and New England involved birds present for only one or two days. The only other Hermit Warbler that lingered in our region for more than a few days was the one found in Green Bay, Nova Scotia (*American Birds* 49: 123; an incorrect date of discovery, December 7, appears in Jaramillo 1995, and is passed on by Marantz and Quilty 1997). This individual remained for about a month, being last seen on January 27 (*Birders Journal* 4: 19). But the Vineyard bird, discovered on December 21, 1997, was "in residence" for over ten weeks, observed for the last time on March 4, 1998 (*Bird Observer* 26: 209).

Several factors seem likely to have contributed to the persistence of this warbler:

1.) Habitat. The breeding habitat of the Hermit Warbler is coniferous — mainly Douglas Fir — forest in the northwestern United States (Dunn and Garrett 1997), and this warbler often shows a preference for the tallest trees available (Bent 1953). Assuming that it was indeed a first-year bird, the Vineyard Hermit Warbler had very likely spent much of its life in tall firs, and it was presumably best suited, by both evolution and experience, to living among tall, short-needled conifers. On Martha's Vineyard, the long-needled Pitch Pine (native) and Red and White pines (introduced), and the scaly-needled and modest-sized Red Cedar, are probably the dominant conifers. Firs of any kind are essentially nonexistent on the Vineyard (MVSRP 1997), but the widely planted White Spruce may offer a foraging substrate that is structurally similar to a Douglas Fir. As far as I know, the spruce stand the warbler turned up in is the largest patch of spruces on the Island, extending about a mile north to south and varying between about thirty and 100 yards in width. The trees were probably planted in the late 1940s or early 1950s, as part of one of several postwar efforts to establish a viable lumber industry on the Vineyard (John Varkonda, pers. comm.), and I estimate that the largest of them are at least seventy-five feet tall.

2.) Climate. Fir/spruce forest, of course, is easy to find farther north in New England, or at higher elevations. But those regions feature much harsher winters than we generally experience on Martha's Vineyard. Wind is unrelenting here

(and not just during the winter), and we get our share of nasty rain or snow storms — but generally our winter temperatures, moderated by the surrounding ocean, are considerably milder than those experienced by most of mainland New England. Our Hermit Warbler, in other words, was lucky enough to stumble over a familiar forest type — in a place a good deal more comfortable than is usually associated with such forests.

Interestingly, the Green Bay, Nova Scotia, bird also occupied a spot that combined proximity to the ocean with short-needled conifers: a grove of spruce trees on the edge of Green Bay (Ian McLaren, pers. comm.) This individual was apparently more likely than the Vineyard bird to stray from the spruces and forage in adjacent deciduous trees, where it frequently gleaned branches and trunks “like a creeper” (*Birders Journal* 4: 19).

Also no doubt instrumental in the survival of the Vineyard bird was the fact that the winter of 1997-1998 was an exceptionally mild one in the area. The Vineyard experienced virtually no snowfall, only a couple of minor ice storms, and very little in the way of sustained cold weather. On many days, temperatures rose above 40° F, and on a number of days during the winter, I encountered moths or flies flitting about. The fact that the Hermit Warbler foraged almost constantly suggests that it operated on a precarious energy budget while it was on the Vineyard, but the specific conditions of this winter surely both facilitated the bird's foraging and limited the energy it had to expend maintaining its body temperature.

3.) Flocking. Though I don't know when the Hermit Warbler arrived in its winter home, a flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets had been present in that stand of spruces during each of several visits I had made starting in late October. If there were local variations in the density of food (and the preference of the kinglet flock for particular areas within the spruce stand suggests that this might have been the case), then the warbler may have benefited from the “local knowledge” of its flock-mates.

It is of course impossible to say what became of this warbler. It grew progressively harder to locate during February, though when found it continued to appear alert, active, and healthy. The last sightings of the bird occurred immediately after a period of unseasonably warm weather (I noted my first butterflies for the year on February 28); while it is possible that the Hermit Warbler succumbed after a season of gradual deterioration due to cold and insufficient food, it seems equally possible (and more pleasant to contemplate) that the mild conditions persuaded the bird that winter was over and prompted it to try to find its way back to its breeding grounds. In any event, this warbler was a delightful addition to the long list of notable avian records from this unique island.

## References

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