



BOREAL BIRDS IN NORTHERN BERKSHIRE COUNTY AND WESTERN FRANKLIN COUNTY

By Ronald E. Rancatti

Massachusetts is blessed with a wide array of landscapes to entice the birder, from coastal marshes and offshore islands to boreal forests. It is my good fortune to be a native of the town of Adams in the far northwestern corner of the state. The town of Adams is home to the highest summit in Massachusetts, Mount Greylock, which forms the town's western border. To the east, Adams is bordered by the Hoosac Range and its adjoining upland plateau. This region offers a huge amount of state forestland for the inquisitive birder to explore. For example, Mount Greylock State Reservation covers over 11,000 acres, and Savoy Mountain State Forest over 10,000 acres. Several wildlife management areas offer still more opportunities for outings.

My own desire to know and understand birds began in my teenage years as an on-again, off-again interest that eventually blossomed into a passion. I first began exploring the countless back roads of Berkshire County with my brother in his trusty 1970 Volkswagen "bug." I took note of logged areas, hiking trails, and natural features such as beaver ponds, ravines, and thick spruce stands. Those early days exploring these areas would eventually aid me greatly in my search for boreal birds at the southern limit of their range: species such as Rusty Blackbird, Lincoln's Sparrow, Blackpoll and Mourning warblers, Olive-Sided and Yellow-Bellied flycatchers, and Bicknell's and Swainson's thrushes. In this article I describe some of my experiences with each of these species and share what knowledge I have gained.

Mourning Warbler

Traveling those back roads with my brother in the late 1970s and early 1980s would eventually pay off in my search for the seldom-encountered Mourning Warbler. With the aid of the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas account of the habitat preferences of this species, I began my surveys of the logged areas I had noted eight or ten years earlier. In these areas the Mourning Warbler proved to be readily found. Most of the locations were at an elevation of at least 1500 feet, usually on a hillside. This is the habitat of choice, but only after the logged area has been reclaimed by an almost impenetrable cover of black raspberry and ferns. In 1989 I located Mourning Warblers in nearly every nearby town. The birds frequently approached after I "pished," allowing a beautiful close-up view. A number of birds were also located by song. Often a Mourning Warbler would be observed singing perhaps twenty feet up in an isolated tree left by loggers. This behavior was unexpected at first, but I soon found it to be commonplace.

The early successional stage that Mourning Warblers prefer, however, is short-lived, and Mourning Warblers will not be found once a location has been cloaked in a thick cover of saplings, so the search for this bird is an ongoing task. Freshly logged areas should be noted, and within a few years after logging ceases, one can expect to find the Mourning Warbler, a species that clearly benefits from humanity's effects on forests through logging.

Blackpoll Warbler

In addition to the Mourning Warbler, extreme northwestern Massachusetts also harbors the much less common Blackpoll Warbler. This species was first found nesting here nearly sixty years ago, and most birders are aware of its presence on Mount Greylock and Saddleball Mountain. Blackpolls can usually be found by walking the Appalachian Trail south from the summit of Mount Greylock to nearby Saddleball Mountain. Following the Appalachian Trail over Saddleball to the junction of the Jones's Nose Trail might yield six to eight Blackpolls on a productive day. Still others can be found along Notch Road heading north from its terminus at Rockwell Road. I walk this portion of Notch Road once each year to keep an eye on their whereabouts. A walk along this road early in the morning in June before traffic appears is highly recommended. It is roughly 1.3 miles to the War Memorial Park sign, which is a good place to stop and return to your car. This stretch of road has readily yielded as many as three singing Blackpoll Warblers.

My only other experience with Blackpoll Warbler away from the Mount Greylock range occurred on a mountaintop in the town of Florida. The story began in the fall of 1992, when I was conducting a hawk migration count at Spruce Hill on the Hoosac Range. At our hawkwatch site 1992 was a good year, but the occasional hawkless moment left me with little to do but daydream. Northeast of our site, a hill with an extensive cover of spruce trees sparked my curiosity. When I examined a topographical map of the area, it indicated that the hill I was examining through my binoculars almost daily was nearly 2800 feet high. The next day, I suggested to my hawkwatching friend Richard Daub that there might be Blackpolls on the hill. In early May 1993 we bushwhacked to the summit of that hill and were pleased to find what looked like suitable habitat for Blackpoll Warbler. Our hunch paid off on June 19, 1993, when Rick and I heard a Blackpoll Warbler here. We wondered whether it was a late migrant or on territory, but on five additional visits made between June 24 and July 9, the bird was not too hard to locate. Without question, this Blackpoll Warbler had staked out a territory, although our efforts to find a female or a nest proved futile.

The hill, nameless on the USGS topographical map, has an unofficial name shared among my friends Rick Daub and the late Bob Goodrich and my family members. I had tried to convey to my family just how rare it was to locate a

Blackpoll Warbler away from Mount Greylock, so naturally, to us the hill is now affectionately known as "Blackpoll Mountain."

Blackpoll Mountain was visited four times in 1994 from June 29 through July 24. Once again the singing male was located each time. Again, a search for a mate or a nest proved futile. In 1995 our first visit to Blackpoll Mountain was not until June 30. The Blackpoll was not found on this first visit, and I felt that perhaps this location was now abandoned. However, the next visit, on July 11, paid off, and it was on this date that I came as close as I ever had to proving breeding here by this species. The male was located atop a spruce holding a food item in its bill. My excitement grew as I expected him to take flight with that food item to its nest. Finally, after I had watched for what seemed like an eternity, he simply ate that little green caterpillar and flew off out of sight. Never was any stronger evidence of breeding to be found at this site, but finding a Blackpoll here three summers in a row convinced me that this species must have nested. It is possible that a nest was too high in the conifers for me to be able to see it.

I visit this hilltop twice during each breeding season, usually once in June and again in July. The Blackpoll Warbler has not been found here since 1996, but I'll keep trying. I have submitted a formal proposal to the United States Geographic Board of Names to designate this now-nameless hill as Blackpoll Mountain.

Lincoln's Sparrow

Another boreal species I take great pleasure in searching for is Lincoln's Sparrow, first recorded breeding in Massachusetts in the town of Florida on July 11, 1981, when a nest containing three nestlings and one egg was found by David Stemple. A different location in Florida would also reveal the presence of breeding Lincoln's Sparrow in the spring of 1993. My first visit to this very old beaver meadow yielded a singing Lincoln's Sparrow on May 14, 1993. My next visit to this site was on May 28, 1993. The male was easily located, and after consulting the accounts of this species in the New York and Vermont breeding bird atlases, I had a good idea where to look for the nest. My first step was to leave my Newfoundland dog home — a tough decision, because he accompanied me on nearly every birding activity that I was ever involved in, but I knew he might harm the nest by accidentally stepping on it. (I moved around very little and I retraced my steps whenever possible, to minimize the risk that I would do the same.) The search began early in the morning of June 11, but I came up empty. On a return visit on June 18, I found the nest of the Lincoln's Sparrow without much effort. The trick was first to locate one of the pair and just watch its behavior. This allowed me to remain motionless for periods of time. When I had narrowed the possible nesting site to a very small area, I made my move. At this time it appeared that the female had settled down on the nest,

because she had not been seen since I saw her on the ground near an old broken tree trunk. The male was at the near edge of the beaver meadow, bursting occasionally into song. Alert and carefully placing each step, I walked toward the point where I last saw the female. As expected, she flushed from her nest on the ground. The nest was sunken into the moss and grass mat and contained four nestlings. I took a few photographs and then withdrew as quickly as possible. The Vermont state line was only about 200 feet from this nest, running right through the northern edge of this old beaver meadow. But the nest was on the Massachusetts side and hence furnished our second nesting record.

Lincoln's Sparrow was again found at this location in 1994 and 1995. No nest search was conducted in either of these two years because I did not want to jeopardize the birds, but it is possible that they nested again in this beaver meadow. The Lincoln's Sparrow has not been found at this location since.

Located in the town of Windsor is the wonderful Eugene Moran Wildlife Management Area. At this site, Lincoln's Sparrows have picked up the slack created by the absence of birds at the Florida location. From 1996 to 1998 Lincoln's Sparrows were observed here by many birders. On a field trip to the area on June 6, 1998, several other birders and I closely examined some sparrows. We agreed that one of them was a recently fledged Lincoln's, probably indicating another breeding occurrence in Massachusetts; Windsor is the most southerly of the three locations. I was not aware of the presence of this species at the Moran WMA in 1999.

Rusty Blackbird

In addition to Mourning Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, and Lincoln's Sparrow, the Rusty Blackbird is high on my list of favorite boreal species. Taking the advice of Bob Goodrich to be on the lookout for this species as a breeder in the state, I began a search for a nesting pair. I have always had a passion to visit new places, and one place that I had set my sights on was a beaver pond in the town of Monroe, which borders Florida on the east.

A scouting trip to this location in March 1992 left me impressed, so a return visit in May was worked into my busy schedule. The trip to this beaver pond on May 17 was truly magical. Within twenty minutes of our arrival, Richard Daub and I had found the male, the female, and what we felt was surely the nest tree: a small spruce roughly twelve feet tall near the water's edge (a typical choice, according to most accounts of the species). Further observations rewarded us with a view of the female flying to this tree. Looking into the nest to view its contents would have been risky to the nest, but the opportunity to view the birds' behavior from a safe distance was worth returning for on May 12 and May 27. The male was found to be aggressive toward the grackles which would appear (from some other location, since we did not believe they were nesting at this site). The beaver pond was also visited by a Broad-winged Hawk that was

attacked by both Rusty Blackbirds. In between all the excitement, when things were quiet, we observed both male and female foraging around the edge of the open water. It quickly became apparent that this was their typical foraging behavior, finding food by turning over leaves, and we frequently found them walking along logs that beavers had toppled long ago. On our next visit to this site, on June 4, I walked over to the nest tree for the first time since May 17 and found two fledglings on the lower branches of a nearby spruce. The parent birds had spotted me just as I was nearly up to the nest tree, and were very agitated to say the least. After a quick look at the two fledglings, I made a hasty retreat.

On June 18 we found both adult birds but found no sign of the juveniles. We hoped they were doing fine. My last visit to the area was on July 2, but I could not locate a Rusty Blackbird anywhere. In 1993 they returned again but to a different part of this beaver pond complex. The date was May 15, and we located the nest tree in no time. Once again it was in a small spruce near standing water, and this time the nest was low enough to enable us to look at its contents without too much effort. The nest contained three eggs. A brief second visit one week later on May 22 revealed both adult birds. The eventual outcome of this apparent nesting attempt was never learned.

Additional sightings of Rusty Blackbirds during the breeding season include June 15 and June 18, 1994, in Florida. These sightings were made at the same beaver meadow in Florida that hosted the nesting Lincoln's Sparrows. No conclusive evidence of breeding activity by Rusty Blackbirds could be obtained. Other sightings include one in a beaver pond near North Road in Monroe June 3, 1997, and three in a different beaver pond on the same road on June 27, 1998.

Olive-sided Flycatcher

This species can usually be found breeding in the same type of habitat selected by Lincoln's Sparrows and Rusty Blackbirds, but the flycatcher may also occur in other boreal settings that are not ideal for the other two species: areas with tall spruce trees and tiny patches of wet ground or possibly a small stream. The "Tall Spruces" area on Mount Greylock is a prime example of this type of habitat.

Sadly, we may have already lost the Olive-sided Flycatcher as a breeder here in Massachusetts. I have not found any evidence of this species breeding since the summer of 1991, when I discovered two nesting pairs in the town of Hawley. The Tall Spruces area on Mount Greylock was at one time an excellent place to encounter this species. Apparently they have disappeared from Greylock, for there have been no recent reports of which I am aware. The many beaver ponds found in the uplands that I census for other boreal species in May and early June are visited again in late June and early July in hopes of locating this species. But my only sightings now appear to be of migrants, which I find from late May through early June. An Olive-sided Flycatcher located in suitable

habitat in this time period could represent a bird on territory, but I am usually disappointed on follow-up visits.

The Hell's Kitchen Road in Hawley has historically been a productive site for Olive-sided Flycatchers. My records indicate a pair here in July 1987, a single bird on June 13, 1988, and a nesting pair in 1991. Another pair was located in the town of Hawley in 1991 at the Hawley Bog. I studied both nests whenever I had the opportunity. One nest was located in a tall hemlock at the edge of a beaver pond off Hell's Kitchen Road, and the other was found in a much smaller spruce in the Hawley Bog. On a sad note, everything seemed to be going smoothly until on one visit I was shocked to find both nest structures destroyed. It is likely that predation was the cause in both cases. A single Olive-sided did return to the Hell's Kitchen Road area and was observed on June 13 and June 26, 1992, but could not be found on later visits. I will continue to hope to find this species breeding in the area again.

The only other habitat type chosen by this bird for breeding is the type of logged hillsides that Mourning Warblers favor. While other accounts of this habitat selection do exist, I have only seen one instance of this habitat choice, on a logged area of Mount Williams on the Greylock Range. Along with the Olive-sided Flycatcher, five Mourning Warblers were also noted. The outcome of this apparent breeding attempt is not known.

Visitors to the northwestern part of the state should be on the alert for this declining species and should report their findings to allow a clearer picture of the true status of this flycatcher.

Yellow-Bellied Flycatcher

The Yellow-Bellied Flycatcher, first discovered on Greylock by William Brewster on June 28, 1883, is confined mostly to the bogs dotting Saddleball Mountain on the Greylock Range. Other dates by various observers include July 1908, 1933, 1944, June 1961, and June 1972. This species has become rather regular since the 1980s. My first encounter with Yellow-bellied Flycatchers occurred in June 1986 in a spruce bog located roughly one mile from the large Appalachian Trail sign alongside Rockwell Road. There are numerous bogs on this mountain, and the Yellow-bellied has been observed at several of them. I found the species again in 1987 at the same bog. This bird was even found calling from the same tall dead spruce.

At this time I learned that Yellow-bellied Flycatcher had not been confirmed as a nesting species in Massachusetts, although it was generally assumed to nest here. My research of their nesting locations led me on a search for the proof needed to confirm nesting for the first time. This proved to be extremely difficult for several reasons. First, the birds are very quiet at times, and even when they are vocal, they are hard to locate because of the thick forest cover. Second, the nest is one of the best-concealed structures built by any bird

in the area, so one must generally flush the female from the nest in order to find it. No small wonder that this bird has as yet not been confirmed as a breeder! It is a time-consuming task to search for the nest, and the birds do not help in any way with their shy nature. From 1988-1995 I did not find any Yellow-bellied Flycatchers on Saddleball Mountain. However, there may have been sightings by other birders that I am not aware of. Things changed in 1996, when I found not just one but apparently two singing males. The same could be said for the 1997 breeding season. In 1997 I conducted an exhaustive search for a nest but could not locate it. However, I was able to find an old nest among the roots of an upturned tree, which may have been used by the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher the year before. The Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was located again on Saddleball in 1998 and 1999. I did search for nesting evidence but restricted it to upturned tree roots only for fear of disturbing the birds. Once again nothing was ever found. It seems like it will take a bit of luck to confirm breeding for this species.

Finding a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher during the breeding season away from the Greylock Range is rare, and such birds may well represent very late migrants. I did have an encounter with this flycatcher in Florida on June 16, 1994, but follow-up visits yielded no sign of it.

Swainson's Thrush

Quite possibly the most common boreal species described in these accounts is Swainson's Thrush, with Mourning Warbler being a close second. Swainson's Thrush is a bit mysterious due to its abundance on the Hoosac Plateau relative to its frequency in the true boreal conditions found on Mount Greylock. Once regarded as a common nester on Greylock, the species is now difficult to locate there. My records indicate a high count of seven on Mount Greylock and Saddleball Mountain in 1998, and many of my daily records show zero Swainson's Thrush on outings to this area. In comparison, high-elevation surveys that I conduct for the Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences on nearby Haystack Mountain in Wilmington, Vermont, amplify the scarcity of Swainson's Thrush on Mount Greylock. At 3420 feet, Haystack Mountain is nearly the same height as Greylock (3487 feet), but I nearly always encounter three or four Swainson's Thrushes along my short Haystack survey route. Let's hope we do not lose Swainson's Thrush altogether as a breeding species on Mount Greylock.

A place where one can find numerous Swainson's Thrushes is the town of Monroe, particularly in Monroe State Forest. The highest daily count I have ever tallied came while I walked the dirt roads and footpaths by Dunbar Brook. I refer to this circuit route, which is roughly four miles in length, as the "Dunbar Loop." My initial survey of this loop was conducted on July 5, 1994. I counted an astonishing eighteen Swainson's Thrushes (and my counts tend to be on the conservative side). Things only got better four years later when I returned to

retrace my steps and beat the 1994 count with a total of twenty on the later date of July 12. Swainson's Thrushes choose hemlock-lined ravines like the Dunbar Brook area as well the more traditional spruce-covered areas. In addition to this location, two nearby localities also produce good numbers of Swainson's Thrushes: nearby Spruce Mountain, by way of the Spruce Mountain Trail, and North Road, both located in Monroe. A high count for Spruce Mountain was eight on both July 4, 1989, and July 3, 1999. North Road produced an excellent count of nine on July 13, 1999, and also has a history rich in nesting raptors. As a side note, my records show breeding Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, and Sharp-shinned hawks in 1995 and Northern Goshawk in 1999. Also included are Barred and Saw-whet owls to round out the excellent potential of this location.

But in keeping with the Swainson's Thrush's mysterious nature, it can be said that it will occupy areas which are nearly devoid of coniferous growth. A prime example of this type of behavior occurs on Spruce Mountain (not a very good choice of names). Spruce and hemlock occur in very small patches there. In fact, I have located Swainson's Thrushes in areas where I could not even see a single coniferous tree — not something one would expect from this species.

I truly enjoy listening to the song of Swainson's Thrush, and those who feel the same way should visit this place. It is an outing I would highly recommend for its wide variety of bird life and its true natural beauty. In my experiences with Swainson's Thrushes, I have found that they will sing intensely during the first half of July. In fact, I have made it a point to conduct surveys for them at this time. They often will sing to nearly 11 a.m. The Rowe USGS topographical map would be a great help to anyone who is not familiar with this wonderful area.

Bicknell's Thrush

Once a Mount Greylock specialty, Bicknell's Thrush (formerly a subspecies of Gray-cheeked Thrush) has not been found as a breeder there since 1972. In the 1940s this species was found both on the Mount Greylock summit and somewhere along the Long Ridge which forms Saddleball Mountain. One has to wonder what ever happened to Bicknell's Thrush. Is Swainson's Thrush heading for the same fate? Bicknell's still occurs in the Catskills and at Haystack Mountain, only 20 miles to the northeast. The same survey I conduct at Haystack Mountain I also conduct on Mount Greylock. In addition to my work there, Mount Greylock is also visited by a host of other birders. However, despite all of the attention that this mountain receives, there are no signs that breeding Bicknell's Thrushes have returned here. The summit seems to be so popular with tourists that it makes one wonder if human disturbances forced them out. Or perhaps things are not too rosy on their wintering grounds in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. For whatever reason, 1999 now marks the twenty-seventh anniversary of their disappearance as a breeder from this state. I

will always be on the lookout for this species, especially on my treks along the Appalachian Trail over Saddleball's long ridge, where human disturbance is practically nil. My hopes for the return of this thrush are fading, but they are birds and they do have wings, which means they can show up anywhere.

Acknowledgements: Much of the personal accounts I have shared would not have been possible without the guidance and encouragement of Robert Goodrich, to whom this issue is dedicated. The friendship we developed over the past ten years is irreplaceable. Our outings together and lengthy phone conversations talking about birds in all aspects will be sorely missed. His passing in September was a great loss to me and to the birding community.

Ronald Rancatti, an Adams native, became interested in birds on a camping trip to Maine's North Woods in 1977. Over time his interests have focused mostly on local breeding songbird populations. His contributions to our knowledge and to the benefit of birds of all types include the development and continued monitoring of a bluebird trail started in 1987 and the placement and monitoring of many kestrel and Saw-whet Owl nesting boxes. He conducts an annual breeding bird survey route and has participated in the Silvio O. Conte NWR migratory stopover study. In 1999 Ron volunteered to assist field biologists from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) to study nesting activities of Bicknell's Thrush on Stratton Mountain; he plans to assist them again in 2000. Since 1992 Ron has also conducted boreal species mapping surveys for VINS on both Mount Greylock and Haystack Mountain. The close of 1999 marks the completion of another full-time hawkwatch at Spruce Hill in North Adams, where Ron has been an official counter annually since the site's first season in 1986.

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