

A Tiny Bit of Olive and Gray Against a Field of White

Mark Lynch

Every year while out birding, if you are very lucky, you will have a few experiences that will cause you to stop in your tracks and simply stare in amazement at the lives that birds lead. At these moments, you get a deep understanding, almost an empathetic epiphany if you will, of how rigorous and dangerous bird's lives really are and how close they live to that fine edge between life and death.

It started out typical enough: covering the Berkshires for Birdathon 2002 for Broad Meadow Brook. Friday, May 17, was an outstanding kickoff to the marathon and rates as some of the finest, most exciting and rewarding birding I have ever done in inland Massachusetts. But *that*, as they say, is a story for another time. Suffice it to say that, as Sheila and I turned in at 11 p.m. in Pittsfield, with smiles, I remarked that, because we had seen so many good birds that day, the next day we would probably die in an auto accident by some unforgiving laws of birding karma. Nothing quite so dramatic happened, but....

We had been expecting foul weather all week at some point during Birdathon. Watching local forecasts and the Weather Channel in the hotel room, we knew that we would be waking up to rain and that all teams would have a tough day of it. Dawn broke and, peeking out the window, we glumly observed a cold hard rain. "Well," I observed, "this will be as bad as it gets...it's supposed to clear up by the afternoon." After all, we had birded the Berkshires during Birdathon in the rain many times. Last year we started the event Friday at 6 p.m. in Florida, Savoy, and Windsor in fog, wind, and cold, and we made the best of it. We donned our foul-weather gear and headed out.

We started in Pittsfield proper, eventually arriving at Onota Lake, where despite less than perfect visibility, we saw White-winged and Black scoters, Common Mergansers, Spotted Sandpipers, and even a drake Gadwall. It was then that it started to snow. Initially, it was just some wet clumps among the drops, but it was obvious that the weather was turning uglier. "This will be as bad as it gets," I stupidly remarked.

Pontosuc Lake had few ducks, and landbirds were, as you can imagine, very tough to come by. A small flock of warblers in some pines was a welcome relief. I began to notice the Yellow Warblers. They were the only really visible warbler in this miserable weather. Several times we watched them dashing frantically from bush to bush, chipping loudly. We concluded that they may already have been on the nest, which started us thinking about the effects this weather had on small nesting insect-eating birds. Numerous swallows, mostly Trees and Barns, cruised low over the ponds in the chilly mist searching for some food. In certain spots we started to see bushes and trees covered with cold, dripping wet swallows and reflected on how

prolonged wet weather at this point in their breeding season can cause high mortality among aerial feeders. I started to feel guilty being out and about trying to tick birds that were under so much stress.

Hoosac Lake in Cheshire at least had a Solitary Sandpiper that flew in calling right in front of us. Any bird at this point was cheery. The temperature was dropping, and it was snowing in earnest. But it wasn't sticking to the wet pavement. "This will be as bad as it gets," I said once again, this time not at all believing myself. We still had to try Mount Greylock and decided to get to the mountain without delay.

By the time we got to the Greylock Visitor's Center it was really snowing, and trees, fields, houses, and roads were covered with a few inches of heavy, wet snow. We started to drive up the mountain and quickly noticed that the trees were bent ominously over the road, the branches weighed down with the snow. Broken branches began to appear on the road, and we saw newly fallen trees. Amazingly, there was bird song just a short distance up the road from the Visitor's Center. It was a real disconnect to hear and see Black-throated Blue Warbler, Redstart, Red-eyed Vireo, and even a lone Mourning Warbler singing amid a scene better suited for January. As we slowly drove farther, even more trees were bent low over the road, creating the effect of a gloomy, wet tunnel along stretches. Warblers quickly disappeared but were replaced by thrushes. Thrushes of every sort were out on the road in areas where, because of the cover of the bent trees, there was no snow. Interestingly, there was no thrush song whatsoever. These thrushes were loath to fly back into the forest, so we could stop the car and get killer looks. The thrushes hopped back and forth across the road or flew short distances, but never went very far into the trees. These birds were mostly Hermits, but with good numbers of Veerys and a few Swainson's. A single Gray-cheeked/Bicknell's gave us good views, but frankly we were getting worried at this point. A service truck had passed us going down slope. We had seen no other cars going up slope. We continued a short distance. The thrushes soon petered out as we



SWAINSON'S THRUSH, GEORGE C. WEST

climbed higher, and all we could find was a single female towhee. We began to hear the loud crack of breaking branches, and the snow was seriously starting to choke the road. We headed down slope in a bit of a panic and into the Visitor's Center. We informed the woman behind the desk that the road conditions on the mountain were getting dangerous. She told us that a trail repair crew was on the mountain, and she remarked that she was concerned about getting them down. We left and drove the Greylock-West Mountain Road. The dirt stretch

of this road along the base of Greylock was sloppy and a bit dicey to navigate. Again, on open snowless stretches, we were treated to a thrush show the likes of which I had never seen.

We decided to continue to Savoy and Florida State forests and see whether we could turn up winter finches for the Birdathon. I rationalized that the severest weather would be confined to the highest point, Greylock. After all, it couldn't get any worse than it was on the mountain. By this time, all the snow was having a strange effect on us. We were losing our sense of what time of the year it was. Intellectually, I knew it was May and that we should be looking for warblers, but almost instinctively I was looking for Pine Grosbeaks, Northern Shrikes, and Boreal Chickadees.

As we started to drive through the state parks, conditions really deteriorated. It was still snowing heavily, and it was piling up on the unplowed roads. Branches and entire trees were crashing down loudly all over. The temperature was thirty-two degrees on the nose, and it didn't budge from there for the next several hours. We started to think about the prospects of running into snowmobiles. We managed to see a few Golden-crowned Kinglets which seemed right at home in the snow-draped evergreens. We kept reminding ourselves out loud that it was mid-May. A desperate-looking woodcock flew from an open seep to an area of deep snow under some birches. Sheila stuck her hand into the snow. It went from the tip of her extended index finger and covered her entire palm, and it was still snowing. In Florida, we found a pair of Common Mergansers at a small pond and also heard a sapsucker. A pair of Canada Geese with their five goslings were nibbling at a tiny patch of grass that hadn't been covered yet. On short stretches of road with minimal snow, we again experienced a phenomenal thrush show. A utility truck zipped by us, and the prospect of coming across downed wires added to our tension. The trees here were overburdened by snow and were bent so low that the car scraped the branches as we continued. Perhaps the strangest sight was coming across a caravan of jeeps, obviously out for a lark. They turned around and left. We rationalized that they were heading to some dirt road in the park, but we never saw them again.


Still winter finchless, and certainly in an extended period of diminishing returns for our efforts, we decided to head up to Monroe and make a last crazy try for some Evening Grosbeaks, which are usually around here as breeding birds. We were caught up in the whole surreal aspect of what we were doing and didn't want to simply quit now. Driving down Tilda Hill Road was a familiar experience. We had birded the feeders along here many times in January and February. Indeed, under the feeders were the juncos and White-throats you would expect in such a snow-covered scene. At the intersection of Main Road and Turner Hill Road, we heard an unfamiliar call (yes, we were driving through all this slop with the windows open). We stopped and got out, and it was then that I had my epiphany. The unfamiliar call was coming from a Blue-headed Vireo high up in a birch. Its call was like some shortened, hoarse version of its typical song. It was poking itself into the snow-caked leaf clusters looking for food, disappearing briefly into the snow while doing so. It was then that it really, deeply hit me what a life-threatening event this weather was for the migrants, especially for the vireos and warblers. At the risk of sounding anthropomorphic, I

don't think I have ever seen a sadder looking bird. I found it depressing in the extreme. As we continued down Turner Hill road toward the Vermont border, we stopped by a familiar snowy field backed by a dense row of snow-covered planted conifers where we had seen shrike and winter finches in January and February years before. It looked precisely as we had seen it in those deep winter months, and we had again to keep reminding ourselves aloud that it was indeed late spring. But I couldn't get that vireo out of my mind. As we drove back to Main Road, an Ovenbird flew in front of us and dove behind some snow at the base of some trees. Suddenly Birdathon seemed very far away and a bit trivial.

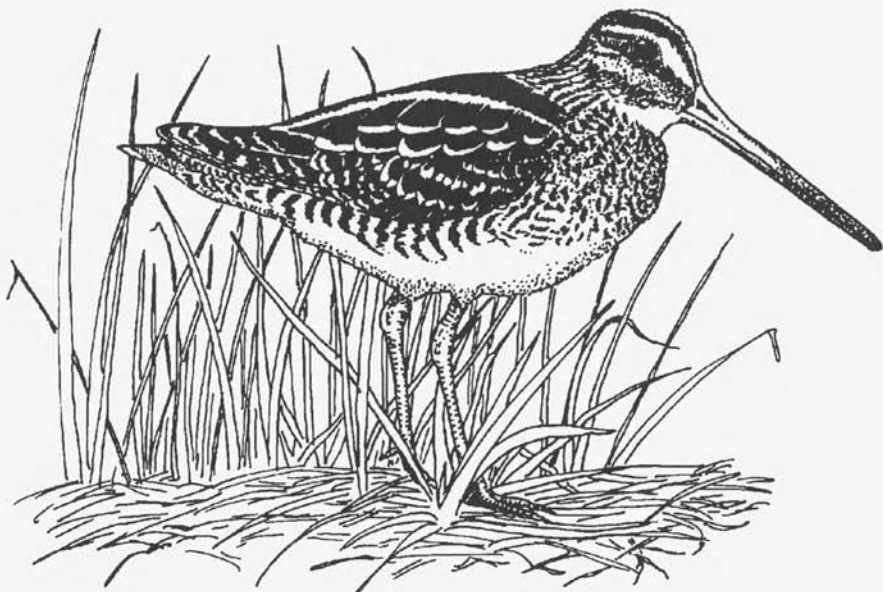
At the corner of Main Road and Kingsley Hill Road, a small flock of White-crowned Sparrows cheered us when we really needed our spirits elevated. Sheila then proceeded to drive down Kingsley Hill Road. For those of you who have never driven this theme park thrill ride disguised as a road, it is one of the most unrelentingly steep stretches of pavement in the state, deadending suddenly at Readsboro Road and the Deerfield River after dropping close to a thousand feet. This road is not for the faint of heart or for those who find the smell of straining brakes annoying. Of course, driving it in freezing temperatures and abundant snow conditions like we were experiencing at that moment can at best be called questionable or foolhardy. After all, the road is typically closed in the winter months.

Arriving at the lower elevation along the river, we noticed that down here, there was very little, if any, snow on the ground. Everything was lush and green. The acutely steep, round-topped hills of Monroe and Rowe closely hem in this little valley on either side of the winding river, creating some of the most dramatic scenery in the state. The hills all around were white with snow, but here at eye level it was spring again. The snow was changing over to rain, so finally things were really looking up. If this contrast in landscapes wasn't mind-boggling enough, we were amazed to suddenly hear warbler song and lots of it. Even though it was still overcast and wet, the trees all along the river rang with the songs of Redstarts, Black-throated Greens and Blues, Magnolias, Chestnut-sideds, and Red-eyed Vireos. Hermit Thrushes and Veerys could also now be heard. It was such a dramatic contrast to literally just minutes ago that the snowy world of the hilltops seemed like a distant dream, although all you had to do was look up across the river to see what we had left. These were not just breeding birds on territory, because the flocks included species like Northern Parula, Tennessee, and Bay-breasted warblers. Other unusual sightings included two Savannah Sparrows, an atypical species for this immediate area, although they breed in fields on the hilltops. Three Bobolinks were found feeding on a lawn like so many starlings. Here too were winter finches, and we found White-winged Crossbills and Evening Grosbeaks. After all, why would an Evening Grosbeak prefer a cold snow-covered hill in the breeding season any more than other species? We just assume they would because we most often encounter them in the dead of winter. We reveled in the experience of finding lots of thriving birds and enjoyed every last species and song.

The next day, all that snow seemed very far away in miles and time. But I still thought about that vireo. I don't think I shall ever forget watching that bird. I

wondered about the effect that weather would have on the trees and plants of the Northern Berkshires, and therefore the insects, and ultimately the nesting season of migrants. What about the May butterflies like the early hairstreak? Of course, migrating birds face this type of meteorological disaster on a somewhat regular basis, whether snow or fog, or floods or hurricanes. And I am sure that these events do take their toll on the population. It is the fate for many landbird migrants. But it is one thing to read about such events; it is quite humbling and sobering to witness them. I recalled a quote from Roger Tory Peterson: "Migration is the greatest adventure in the life of a bird, the greatest risk it must take." 

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WILSON'S SNIPE, GEORGE C. WEST