

FIELD NOTES

Birdbath Birding

Henry T. Wiggin

In 1984 my live-in housekeeper and I went to the New England spring flower show. After we had thoroughly seen all the articles on exhibit, Miss Rielly wanted to go to the commercial section. So we did and soon met a man named Monti. He was selling shallow birdbaths. Bridie said, "We have to buy two so the small birds can take a bath." I protested feebly but ended by purchasing two of them. This was the best purchase I ever made. At my house birding has never been the same. The best – never equaled – was May 17, 1987. Coming to one or the other Monti birdbaths that day were: 1 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 4 species of thrushes (including Gray-cheeked, no Wood), 1 Philadelphia Vireo, 33 warblers (including 4 Tennessees, 2 Cape Mays, 1 Blackburnian, 6 Bay-breasteds, 1 Wilson's, and 1 Canada), and 1 Scarlet Tanager male. To see 6 Bay-breasteds splashing away all at once is something I will never forget.

Other highlights:

May 7, 1985. A Bay-breasted took a bath. After he left, a Worm-eating took his bath.

May 14, 1985. A gorgeous Orange-crowned Warbler showing his topknot splashed around in a birdbath for five minutes. Why couldn't it be ten minutes, I thought wistfully.

April 22, 1988. I was sitting in the living room reading a newspaper, and my housekeeper said, "There's a red bird in the birdbath." "A cardinal," I said casually. "Oh no," said Bridie, "I know cardinals. This bird does not have a crest and this bird is pinkish red." "Jesus Christ!" I hollered. "SUMMER TANAGER!" Bridie said, somewhat severely, "Don't swear." It was a Summer Tanager – he was beautiful.

May 19, 1991. A Swainson's Thrush bathed to the point that he looked almost all water. Gray-cheeked? Then he showed us his cheek and eye ring. I still like to see him, I mumbled to myself. Later in the day a Cape May Warbler and a Black-throated Blue took baths. I like the BTB – he looks so clean and neat.

May 1 1992. My housekeeper said, "There is a funny-looking oriole in the birdbath." I went, "Orchard!"

May 13, 1992. A Nashville Warbler in one of the birdbaths. I like his looks too.

May 21, 1992. A Swainson's Thrush in a birdbath.

May 11, 1993. A Magnolia Warbler splashing away happily. To me this is a lousy name. I like Audubon's "Black-and-Yellow Warbler" much better.

May 19, 1994. My housekeeper sang out, "There is a funny-looking chickadee in a birdbath." I went, "Blackpoll Warbler."

May 3, 1995. A Yellow-throated Vireo in a birdbath, a first for Brookline.

May 14, 1997. A handsome Gray-cheeked Thrush took a bath.

April 20, 1998. Brown Thrasher took a bath. One of my favorite birds. I grieve they

are so much scarcer than in my youth. Mockingbirds drive them out? It always seems to me that they have too much tail. Could it be that when God made the birds He had a lot of tail left over so the thrasher got the extra tail?

August 21, 2000. An Ovenbird in the birdbath.


May 10, 2000. I was working at my desk and a bird sang out, *chick it to be stick*.

Sounds like a White-eyed Vireo, but not bloody likely, I mumbled to myself. Just to be on the safe side, I'll check the birdbaths. There he was!

October 22, 2001. An Orange-Crowned Warbler in a birdbath. It made my day.

April 16, 2002. A Louisiana Waterthrush splashing away happily. A first for Brookline.

May 12, 2002. A Lincoln's Sparrow in a birdbath. He looks so small, I thought, so fragile.

Date unknown, within last ten years. I must have been a real bonehead that day – I made no record. I was watching a Yellow-rumped Warbler in a birdbath. The bird had its back to me. Why couldn't this warbler have been more interesting, I thought. The warbler turned around. Solid yellow throat. Audubon's! 

Christopher's Puddle

Marjorie W. Rines

Christopher was surfing the web one day and came across the Sibley-Monroe list of all bird species in the world. He told his mother it was the most exciting day of his life. "Better than Christmas?" asked his mother. "Oh yes," he sighed. Christopher is five years old.

By May Chris could think of nothing but warblers. He had pored through his books, memorizing field marks, and was impatient to test his skills. But so far spring had been a disappointment. His intellectual skills far surpassed his coordination, and he couldn't line his binoculars up with a bird seen high above his head. If, by chance, he lucked upon the bird, his five-year-old hands were too small to reach the focus knob. He often just gave up in disgust, and refused to use the binoculars.

In mid-May I had a birding date with Chris and Debora Diggins, his naturalist tutor. We wanted to keep Christopher focused on the positive, so we agreed beforehand not to talk about birds we were hearing high in the trees, and just to call attention to the lower birds that might be seen with the naked eye.

When we got to our destination, we were assaulted with bird song, loud and insistent from every side. Warblers flickered everywhere in the foliage, appearing and disappearing among the leaves. It was one of those mornings every birder dreams of. We were able to get close looks at a handful of warblers by working the thickets, but the song around us was tantalizing, and after an hour or so of many misses, Chris was getting frustrated.

I knew about a Hairy Woodpecker nest nearby, so decided to show it to him, hoping that the chance to capture an intimate view of a bird family would pique his interest. The dead tree hosting the woodpeckers is right on the edge of a clearing with a little puddle, maybe twenty feet across. To minimize any disturbance to the woodpeckers, we all sat down on logs right beside the puddle. The young were close to fledging and stuck their heads out begging noisily. A grackle flew in to perch near the hole and eyed one of the young. The adult flew in and drove it off.

Debora and I continued to watch the woodpeckers, but Chris's attention drifted away. "Catbird," said Chris. We looked to see the catbird that had come in to the puddle for a bath. We stayed very still as it lowered itself to shake, raising its feathers for full water exposure. All of a sudden, an awed expression came over Chris's face and he pointed, whispering "Wilson's Warbler!" There it was, only a dozen feet away, hopping along the edge of the puddle, then picking its way across sticks and leaves closer and closer to us, until it settled into the water to shiver its feathers.



WILSON'S WARBLER, MARJORIE W. RINES

contrasting with its olive back. Then its frustratingly similar sibling species, Orange-crowned, came and loitered, and we carefully compared the field marks – yellow undertail coverts, yellow streaked breast, eyeline.

The clearing was silent apart from the songs of the birds, a magical silence that we barely dared to break with our quietest whispers. The sunlight filtered through the foliage, splashing plumages with a rich and luminescent color. And the birds continued, one after another, seemingly unaware of our presence.

A Black-billed Cuckoo called nearby, and as we searched for it we caught glimpsing views of a Yellow-billed ten feet above the puddle. An oriole poked through the debris at the edge, finally selected a piece of monofilament line for her nest, then flew treewards. And still the parade continued. One after another warbler, sixteen species in all, visited the puddle, plus Wood Thrush, Veery, and five species of sparrow, including one Lincoln's.

Being there was a strange mix of languor and excitement. We were immobile, none of us daring (or wanting) to move, yet with each new bird that visited the puddle, we felt a little whisper of adrenalin. After an hour and a half, Debora and I were worried that Chris might be getting bored and reluctantly asked him if he wanted to do something else. He just looked at us, starry eyed, and simply whispered, "This is so exciting." We stayed for another half hour, and only left when the activity level had subsided.

Returning to the road was a little shock of reality. We had been spellbound by the experience, and suddenly there were cars and people and dogs. The late morning sun was high in the sky, bright and harsh. Speaking aloud for the first time in two hours, trying to talk about what had happened, we chattered, gushing, searching for words to relive it and falling short.



LINCOLN'S SPARROW. MARJORIE W. RINES

I went back to the puddle many times that spring and saw many more wonderful birds, but nothing ever touched the thrill of that first day. It was not just seeing so many birds at so close range, it was seeing them again for the first time with a small boy. Thinking back, the magic returns as I recall the birds, the light, but most of all the look in Christopher's eyes. Memory is a wonderful thing. 🐦

Red-eyed Vireo
 Carolina Wren
 Veery
 Wood Thrush
 American Robin
 Gray Catbird
 Brown Thrasher
 Cedar Waxwing
 Tennessee Warbler
 Orange-crowned Warbler
 Nashville Warbler
 Northern Parula
 Yellow Warbler
 Chestnut-sided Warbler
 Magnolia Warbler
 Black-throated Blue Warbler
 Yellow-rumped Warbler
 Black-throated Green Warbler
 Blackburnian Warbler

Blackpoll Warbler
 Black-and-white Warbler
 American Redstart
 Ovenbird
 Northern Waterthrush
 Mourning Warbler
 Common Yellowthroat
 Wilson's Warbler
 Canada Warbler
 Chipping Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 Lincoln's Sparrow
 Swamp Sparrow
 White-throated Sparrow
 Northern Cardinal
 Indigo Bunting
 Red-winged Blackbird
 Common Grackle
 Baltimore Oriole



DAVID LARSON