

A MacGillivray's Warbler in Lexington, Massachusetts

by Robert H. Stymeist, Waltham

An Oporornis warbler was discovered in the Dunbank Conservation land in Lexington, Massachusetts, on 13 November 1977 by the author and Philip Martin, then of Newton. Although the specific identification was not determined until the morning of 15 November 1977, the bird in question was thought to be a MacGillivray's Warbler (Oporornis tolmiei). The main reason for this belief was the extremely late date of 13 November. The other Oporornis warblers that could be confusing were the Connecticut Warbler (Oporornis agilis), which usually migrates through Massachusetts between the 1st week in September and the 1st week in October, and the Mourning Warbler (Oporornis philadelphia), which usually passes through by the 2nd week in September, although many Mourning Warblers recently have been reported on Cape Cod into late October. Secondly, the plumage was very bright, unlike the many Mourning Warblers which both the author and Philip Martin have seen on other occasions.

The bird was discovered in low shrubs along a brook while we were scouting for the Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count. The bird was studied at close range for 8-10 minutes in the course of 45-50 minutes. It remained very low and was observed on three occasions to go under leaves on the ground! Each time the bird moved it uttered a note similar to that of an Indigo Bunting. The bird responded well to "spishing," at least during the first three days.

We called Richard Veit, who after seeing the bird agreed it should be checked. We were unable to reach anyone during that afternoon who could net and band the bird. Luckily the bird stayed within the same area of its discovery.

On 14 November 1977, Richard Forster and James Baird of the Massachusetts Audubon Society observed the bird and thought it should be captured. Simon Perkins cleared several paths for mist nets that afternoon.

On the morning of 15 November 1977, mist nets were set and within ten minutes the bird was captured, banded, photographed and released by James Baird. It was determined to be a MacGillivray's Warbler on the basis of measurements.

Wesley E. Lanyon and John Bull in Bird Banding, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 187-194, July 1967, stressed the importance of wing-minus-tail measurements in the identification of Oporornis warblers. If the difference is between 2-8 millimeters, then the individual is a MacGillivray's Warbler. If the difference is 12-18 mm, it is a Mourning Warbler. The wing-minus-tail measurement of the Lexington bird was 5 mm (54-49), clearly a MacGillivray's Warbler.

On examination of museum skins, it is apparent that fall-plumaged MacGillivray's Warblers differ consistently from Mourning Warblers in that: (1) the yellow of the underparts is more intense; (2) the throat is white, not yellowish or gray; (3) there are broad, diffuse streaks running laterally down the breast, absent in Mourning; and (4) the eye-ring is usually much more pronounced.

It should also be noted that field identification of other than adult males in the Oporornis group remains difficult and often impossible. Banders have no problem in identifying the great majority of the Oporornis if they use the key dealing with the separation of Mourning and MacGillivray's Warblers which stresses the value of the difference between the measurements of wing length and tail length.

Field guides have placed unwarranted emphasis on the presence of an eye-ring, whether complete, partial or absent. Virtually all Connecticut Warblers have a complete eye-ring regardless of sex, or age. The same seems true of MacGillivray's, incomplete with the white being confined to the areas above and below the eye. In the Mourning Warbler the eye-ring is variable in all ages and in both sexes.

The MacGillivray's Warbler breeds predominately in western United States from Arizona and New Mexico north to the western Canadian provinces and along the coast to southern Alaska. It winters from Mexico south to northern Panama.

Prior to the Lanyon and Bull article in Bird Banding there were no published references to specimens of MacGillivray's Warbler taken east of the Mississippi River. A bird identified as a MacGillivray's in Noblesville, Indiana, on 29 May 1924 was banded and released but was identified by virtue of the incomplete eye-ring; the sex was not specified.

In Massachusetts, Ludlow Griscom in 1939 reported an unusual warbler that frequented the feeder of E. Alexander Bergstrom in Waltham in February 1939. It was identified by Dave Garrison as a female Mourning, though Griscom was uncertain and attempts to collect the bird were unsuccessful. The bird was seen as late as 18 May 1939. On 25 November 1949 another Oporornis warbler was seen in Cambridge by Sibley Higginbotham, but was not collected.

More recently an Oporornis was found dead in a snowbank in Manchester, Massachusetts, by Gloria Hotz on 20 December 1972. A study skin was prepared by Sally Ingalls of the Peabody Museum of Salem. The skin was taken to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and labeled as a Mourning. Not satisfied, Dorothy Snyder of the Peabody Museum sent the skin to the American Museum of Natural History, where after careful measurements and comparisons with their many specimens, it was pronounced to be a Mourning. The wing-minus-tail length of the Manchester bird was 9 mm. Birds that have a wing-minus-tail difference between 9-11 mm are indeterminate.

Lanyon and Bull remeasured Oporornis warblers in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History and discovered two eastern specimens of MacGillivray's Warbler; both were taken in May, 1890. One was taken at Hamilton, Ontario, on 20 May 1890, the other in New Haven, Connecticut, sometime during May 1890. The wing-minus-tail measurements were 8 mm and 7 mm respectively, clearly MacGillivray's.

The Lexington bird was not seen after it was banded in 15 November 1977 and was not rediscovered until 19 November by the author and later by Marcia Litchfield. I was able to return home and call many other birders who came and observed the bird. On Sunday, 20 November, over 60 birders

were able to see the MacGillivray's. It was generally not seen after 11 A.M. each day, except on 13-14 November when it was discovered, despite several attempts by many observers. On several occasions it was seen burrowing under leaves in search of food. It was seen briefly on Thanksgiving day and last seen by Nancy Clayton and Mary Baird on 30 November 1977.

The occasional occurrence of vagrant MacGillivray's Warblers east of the Mississippi valley should be no more unexpected than are the casual records of Black-throated Gray Warblers. If you should see a late Oporornis warbler this fall, take a second look.



MacGillivray's Warbler photographed by Simon A. Perkins.

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