

AN AVIAN FALLOUT AND THE FIRST STATE RECORDS
FOR BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRD AND LUCY'S WARBLER

by Richard S. Heil, S. Peabody

During the latter portion of November, 1979, a highly unusual pattern of continuous S-SW airflow resulted in a widespread avian fallout. Shortly thereafter the first Massachusetts occurrence of Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) and Lucy's Warbler (*Vermivora luciae*) was established, as were a host of late records for many other species. The point of this article will be to project a theory of a displacement, or "blowback," originating far to our southwest. No attempt will be made to relate a precise cause and effect of how and why the fallout occurred, other than to say that a reverse migration aided by a strong southwest airflow after the birds had been carried off course by unfavorable winds is a possible explanation. Rather, I intend to merely report on the unusual weather pattern that preceded the fallout, present evidence that would suggest a common origin for most of the species involved, and give an account of the details on several of the important sightings that resulted.

According to R.E.Lautzenheiser, Massachusetts state climatologist, "the period 23-28 November brought a mini-summer averaging 17° above normal and daily highs averaging 67°. This was the longest stretch so warm so late in the year on record." From November 22-28, the wind blew continuously from the S-SW with rather high average wind speeds. The 26th was particularly windy with an average wind of 17.8 mph, and a peak gust of 52 mph. This was not a localized condition, as nearly the entire eastern portion of the continent was under the same massive southwest airflow. This weather pattern was abruptly halted in our area on November 29, when the winds turned to the NW and the daily high temperatures dropped 20°.

	<u>Max. Temp. (°F)</u>	<u>Average Wind Speed</u>	<u>Wind Peak</u>	<u>Dir.</u>
Nov. 15	45	12.7	28	W
16	46	19.4	45	NW
17	52	14.0	37	W
18	55	8.4	18	NW
19	48	7.9	16	E
20	59	9.2	23	SW
21	57	9.6	29	N
22	55	8.9	21	SW
23	69	9.0	23	SW
24	70	10.5	22	SW
25	70	7.0	16	SW
26	66	17.8	52	S
27	58	16.2	45	W
28	66	16.1	37	SW
29	46	16.1	36	NW
30	41	14.0	32	W

TABLE 1: Summary of local climatological data 15-30 November 1979
National Weather Service (Logan Airport Station)

There is considerable precedence during November for blownback migrants to appear. Barn Swallows in particular are often easier to find after southerly winds in November than in October. Griscom and Snyder (Birds of Massachusetts, 1955) cite a November 29, 1953, record of a Bank Swallow at Martha's Vineyard, "immediately following a violent southerly storm." A Variegated Flycatcher was present at Biddeford Pool, Maine, from 5 to 11 November 1977. The northerly post-breeding migration of this South American flycatcher was probably the most important factor in its appearance.

Table 2 lists twelve species recorded in Massachusetts during and shortly after the warm air flow that prevailed from November 22-28. Three on the list, the Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Lucy's Warbler, share virtually the same winter range: from extreme southwestern United States south through western Mexico. The general area of sympatry for the winter ranges of six of the remaining nine species listed is also western Mexico.

		Location	Observers
Nov.25	Black-chinned Hummingbird	Cohasset	W.Petersen, B.Sorrie
Nov.30	Ash-throated Flycatcher	Belmont	L.Taylor#
Nov.30	Bank Swallow	Manomet	fide K.Anderson
Dec.1	Black-and-white Warbler	Concord	R.Forster
Dec.1	Lucy's Warbler	Ipswich	R.Heil#
Dec.1	Yellow Warbler	Ipswich	R.Heil#
Dec.1	Cape May Warbler	Ipswich	R.Heil#
beg.Dec.	Ovenbird (2)	Manomet	J.VanOs
Dec.8	Wilson's Warbler	Concord	R.Walton
Dec.10	Northern Parula Warbler	Concord	F.Bemis
Dec.10	Prairie Warbler	Nantucket	R.Veit
Dec.13	Blackpoll Warbler	Eastham	C.Goodrich

TABLE 2: Accidental and late sight records from Massachusetts
23 November - 13 December 1979 (# = additional observers)

The fallout was not limited to Massachusetts: during the same period there was an Ash-throated Flycatcher in Maine, and two were found in Rhode Island, where a strikingly late Olive-sided Flycatcher was reported November 23. Another chiefly Mexican species, a Painted Redstart, present at a Dansville, New York, feeder throughout December was almost certainly associated with the fallout in New England. A lack of snow cover and rather mild temperatures allowed for continued late sightings for many species on into early January, particularly on area Christmas Bird Counts.

The Ipswich Yellow Warbler, December 1-2, was a bright yellow individual. Most late records of Yellow Warbler in Massachusetts have proven to be of either the grayer Newfoundland race annicola, or the greener Alaskan race rubiginosa. That the Ipswich bird was clearly neither of these two races would seem to add further to the "blowback" theory of a migrant or wintering eastern Yellow Warbler displaced from Mexico or Central America. The Ipswich sighting is believed to be the latest recorded occurrence for Massachusetts, as was the Manomet Bank Swallow November 30, and the Eastham Blackpoll Warbler December 13.

The Black-chinned Hummingbird

The discovery by G.Pride November 25 of a female immature-plumaged hummingbird at his Cohasset greenhouse prompted a later investigation by W.Petersen and B.Sorrie. The very late date and the understood difficulties in identifying female immature-plumaged Archilochus hummingbirds in the field warranted its capture. Examined and measured in the hand, it was tentatively identified as a Black-chinned Hummingbird, and expert confirmation of the specimen by A.Phillips was recently received. The Black-chinned Hummingbird winters from southern California south throughout western Mexico, and east with some regularity along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida. There is but one record for the Northeast, a bird near Antigonish, Nova Scotia, May 30, 1964.

The Lucy's Warbler

While counting waterfowl at Clark's Pond on Great Neck, Ipswich the morning of December 1, I was surprised to see a Cape May Warbler in the adjacent thickets. A short time later my squeaking produced a very small blue-gray bird with a prominent eye-ring which I initially thought was a gnatcatcher. The bird's shorter tail, lacking white edges or tail spots, general blue-gray color above, paler gray below, whitish eye-ring, prominent brick-red rump, and a small, much more obscured brick-red crown spot soon identified it as a Lucy's Warbler. Seen off and on throughout the day, the bird was viewed by at least thirty observers. At times it was seen being pursued by the aforementioned Yellow Warbler. Scores of birders were unable to locate the Lucy's on the next and subsequent days. Neither the sex or age of the bird could safely be determined since all ages and sexes are quite alike. Even the crown patch, which is most prominent in adult males, least in immatures, becomes obscured in both adult males and females in winter by gray tips and margins to the crown feathers. Although it is a proven fact that the majority of fall western vagrants in the east are birds of the year, to label categorically all such records as immatures when such cannot be readily ascertained by plumage, is only conjecture.



Lucy's Warbler in Ipswich, December 1, 1979
Photographed by Mark Kasprzyk

There are virtually no extralimital records of Lucy's Warbler east of the breeding range, the only record for the "east" being that of an adult collected at Triumph, Louisiana, December 30, 1959. Apparently Lucy's Warblers depart for their winter range immediately after the nesting season and become generally difficult to find on the breeding areas after the end of August. West of the desert in south-coastal California, it is a rare straggler from September to mid-November. This smallest of the American Wood Warblers (Parulidae) nests in mesquite thickets, willows, cottonwoods and along desert streams of the Lower Sonoran deserts, from southeastern Nevada, southwest Utah, southeast California east to central Arizona, southcentral New Mexico, south to northwest Mexico, and has nested as far east as El Paso, Texas. Lucy's Warblers normally winter along the west coast of Mexico from Sinaloa to western Guerrero.

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