

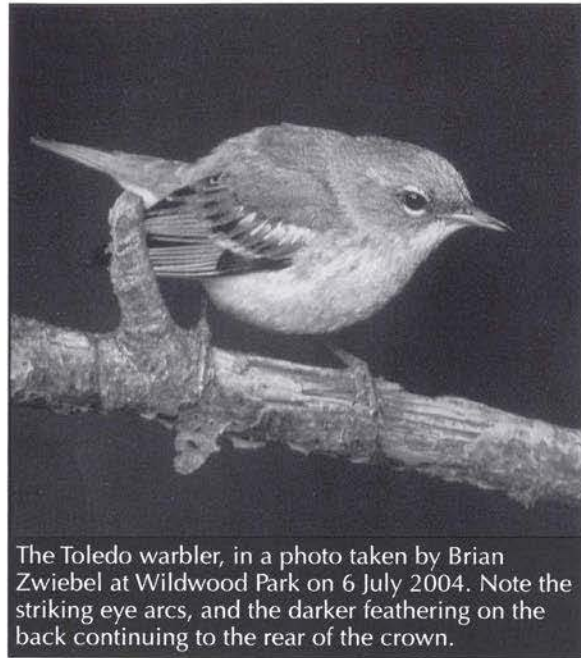
# A Possible Northern Parula X Cerulean Warbler Hybrid in Toledo, Ohio

**Rick Nirschl**

5912 Recamper Drive, Toledo, OH 43613

ricknir@hotmail.com

It was early morning, 16 May 2004. A cold front had come through overnight and prevailing winds were out of the north, not good conditions for a passerine movement at Magee Marsh along the south shore of Lake Erie, where one would



The Toledo warbler, in a photo taken by Brian Zwiebel at Wildwood Park on 6 July 2004. Note the striking eye arcs, and the darker feathering on the back continuing to the rear of the crown.

normally find me birding in mid-May. So I thought I would check out Wildwood Preserve Metropark in Toledo because migrating birds tend to settle in such parks until the winds become southerly again. When I arrived at Wildwood it was a cool and slightly overcast morning, about 50 degrees, with very little wind. The woods were in all their springtime glory with oaks in full blossom lending a silvery look to the forest canopy, a favorite feeding location for warblers. As soon as I stepped out of my van I could hear Nashville, Blackburnian, and black-and-white warblers

singing, and I soon added Cape May and redstart in the rapidly moving flock. A hooded warbler sang from the low shrubs around the Manor House and a mourning warbler followed suit soon after. It was a good start to the morning.

I took a set of stairs down to the Ottawa River floodplain, adding magnolia warbler, scarlet tanager, and yellow-throated vireo to my day's list, where I came upon an unusual-looking warbler. It was bluish above, white beneath, and had two white wing bars. I thought I was seeing a cerulean warbler, but it lacked a breast band as well as the dark streaks expected on the sides. Furthermore, it had a prominent broken eye ring like a northern parula's, yet there was no yellow at all in the throat or breast and no greenish triangular patch on its back. And the blue, especially on the forehead, crown, and wings was a bright cerulean blue, not the blue typical of a parula. I watched the bird feed for about fifteen minutes, whereupon

it started singing the primary northern parula "zeeeeee-up" song. "Well, OK," I thought, "this must be an aberrant-plumaged parula." I watched the bird for another twenty minutes before moving on to see what other treasures this wonderful park would produce. I reported my sightings that afternoon on the Toledo Rare Bird Alert web site, including my observations of this odd-looking individual.

Over the next few weeks I occasionally heard the unusual-looking northern parula singing from the tops of some very large sycamores, but I often had a difficult time seeing the bird, since it tended to remain high in the foliage. Each time I encountered the bird between 16 May and 29 June it never failed to sing the same primary northern parula song. Usually I could get a clear enough look to determine it was the same bird I had seen on 16 May. On 7 June, the warbler joined a flock of birds mobbing a red-tailed hawk perched high in an oak.

Early June had me birding almost daily in western Lucas County, where I turned up another northern parula, this time at Secor Metropark in Toledo. It is noteworthy to have one northern parula in northwest Ohio this late in the season, let alone two. By the end of June things were slowing down a bit in the Oak Openings area and I hadn't been to Wildwood in a while, so I figured I'd check to see if any summer tanagers had shown up there.

On the morning of 30 June one of the first bird songs I heard was that of a cerulean warbler coming from the oaks in front of the Manor House. I was pretty excited because I had never seen a cerulean at Wildwood before, and certainly not in mid-summer. A quick search for the bird, however, turned up not the cerulean warbler I was expecting, but instead that same odd-looking northern parula I had been seeing since mid-May. Only this time it was singing the primary song of a cerulean warbler—"zray zray zray zreeeee"—not the northern parula song it had been using during all my previous visits. The bird was feeding in the oaks, moving quickly from branch to branch, foraging like a cerulean, just as it had on earlier occasions. It never displayed the slower, probing feeding behavior of a northern parula, and never hung upside down to probe leaf clusters as parulas often do.

I watched and listened to the bird for about forty minutes before it disappeared. Now, I realized, given the bird's appearance, behavior, and the combination of songs, I had to consider the possibility that it was a hybrid. I knew that there were a few records of northern parula x yellow-throated warbler resulting in the famous hybrid called "Sutton's" warbler, but I had never heard of a northern parula x cerulean warbler cross. Later, I went on-line to do a little searching. I came up with two reports from the "PABIRDS" Eastern Pennsylvania Birdline of a possible cerulean x northern parula in eastern Pennsylvania on 1 May 2003, and again on 10 May 2004. Though a year apart, both reports were of a bird seen at the Bethlehem Boat Club in Northampton County. Also, I found reference to an article in *The Kingbird*, an ornithological publication for the state of New York, of a northern parula and a cerulean warbler sharing nesting duties on Long Island in June 1994 (Lindsay & Vezo 1995). So I felt a little more confident in reporting something that was certain to be controversial. I decided to post my sighting on the Toledo Rare Bird

Alert website, suggest that it was possibly a hybrid, and look for opinions from other birders. The original posting plus Bob Jacksy's photo of the bird, are at <[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=320&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=320&PN=1)>.

The following day, 1 July, I returned to Wildwood to look for the bird again. It was in the same area but on this day it was singing two songs. It sang the primary cerulean song for about ten minutes but then switched to an alternate northern parula song before it flew off. On 2 July the bird had changed location, and for the third day in a row had altered its repertoire of songs. It was back down on the floodplain again, singing from the tops of sycamores, and now singing the primary song of the northern parula along with the same alternate parula song as the day before.

In summary, the bird's song from 16 May through 29 June was always the primary northern parula song, which sounded like songs 1 and 2 under northern parula's "Song type 1" in the *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs: Eastern Region*. On 30 June the warbler sang a primary cerulean song, which was reminiscent of the fifth, sixth, and seventh songs of cerulean warbler as recorded in the Stokes guide. On 1 July, the warbler sang both a primary cerulean song and an alternate northern parula song. The alternate northern parula song I heard from the Wildwood bird was similar to the fifth and sixth songs listed under "Song type 2" for northern parula in the Stokes guide. After 1 July, the warbler tended to sing mostly the alternate northern parula song, but occasionally it would also sing the typical primary parula song.

In response to my 30 June announcement, Bob Jacksy, an employee of Toledo Area Metroparks, on 3 July posted his photograph of the bird taken at the Window On Wildlife viewing area at Wildwood Preserve in early June. Jacksy's photo helped spur discussion of the bird on both the Toledo and the Ohio-Birds mailing lists. Jacksy's photo was also shared with a number of knowledgeable birders around the country.



Another view of the warbler, also taken 6 July by Brian Zwiebel.

Despite finally having photographic documentation that showed the unusual physical characteristics I had observed and described, I felt additional photographs of the warbler were needed. Two very talented photographers, Brian Zwiebel and Laura Stiefel, arranged to meet me at the park on 6 July. The bird was quiet when we arrived, but within a half hour it started to sing the alternate northern parula song. Zwiebel played the parula song from the *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America* on an MP3 player, and the warbler promptly came down to the speaker, allowing Zwiebel and Stiefel to take a number of pictures. The parula song was replayed twice with similar results, and then after a break of about twenty minutes, Zwiebel played the primary song of a cerulean warbler (again from the Peterson set), and the bird responded just as before, coming to the speaker to see where this other bird was. While Brian and Laura were getting their pictures, I was getting wonderful views of the bird through my binoculars from about twenty feet.

Both Zwiebel and Stiefel posted their photos of the warbler to the Toledo mailing list. Stiefel posted photos on 6 July and again on 7 July (see <[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=324&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=324&PN=1)> for the 6 July photos and <[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=326&PN=2](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=326&PN=2)> for the 7 July photo.) Zwiebel posted his photos on 13 July (see <[http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=334&PN=1](http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=334&PN=1)>). The photos showed the bird in excellent detail and helped spark even more conversation and debate about the bird's origins. Most of the discussion circulated on-line and through e-mail, including comments from two internationally recognized authorities, stated that hybridism was the best hypothesis for this bird's unusual appearance. One birder suggested it might be a northern parula lacking yellow pigments (a condition known as schizochroism) but, after viewing additional photographs, later felt that hybridism was more likely. Another experienced observer felt it was a second-year male cerulean with an extraordinarily unextensive prealternate molt.

We were lucky to get the pictures when we did, because after 6 July the bird began singing less frequently each day, utilizing either the typical northern parula song or its alternate.

### Summary and Conclusion:

I find eight points worth keeping in mind when considering the origins of the Wildwood warbler:

- 1) The broken eye ring suggests a northern parula.
- 2) The brilliant blue in the forehead, crown, and wings was a bright cerulean warbler blue, not the typical blue of a northern parula. This color was much more evident in the field than in photographs of the bird.
- 3) There is some faint streaking on the sides near the shoulders, a characteristic that I don't think a northern parula would have.

- 4) The throat and breast were white, lacking any of the yellow tones one would expect in northern parula.
- 5) The back was a uniform dark bluish-gray from the mid-crown to the mid-back, lacking the greenish triangular patch of a northern parula.
- 6) The feeding behavior was like that of a cerulean warbler—the warbler moved quickly from branch to branch. It never displayed the slower, probing feeding behavior of a northern parula, and it never hung upside down to probe leaf clusters, as parulas often do.
- 7) The shape of the bird looked more like a cerulean warbler.
- 8) As noted above, the warbler employed songs similar to both primary cerulean and northern parula songs, in addition to alternate northern parula songs. It readily responded to playbacks of both cerulean and northern parula warbler songs.

While we will likely never know for sure whether it was a hybrid or an aberrant-plumaged individual, I see evidence of both species in this interesting warbler, and my best guess is that the bird I observed on multiple occasions at Wildwood Preserve in Toledo, Ohio is a hybrid northern parula x cerulean warbler. 🌿

#### References:

- Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. 1990. *Peterson Field Guides: A Field Guide to Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America*. Two cassette tapes. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Elliott, L., D. Stokes, and L. Stokes. 1997. *Stokes Field Guide To Bird Songs: Eastern Region*. Three cassette tapes. Time Warner Audio Books, New York.
- Lindsay P., and T. Vezo. 1995. Cerulean Warbler and Northern Parula tending the same nest. *The Kingbird*. 45:160.
- “PABIRDS” Eastern Pennsylvania Birdline, on-line rare bird alert transcripts, 1 May 2003 & 10 May 2004, edited by Dave DeReamus.
- RBA transcript posted 1 May 2003, accessed 30 July 2004:  
<http://listserv.arizona.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0305a&L=birdeast&F=&S=&P=67>
- RBA transcript posted 10 May 2004, accessed 30 July 2004:  
<http://www.surfbirds.com/phorum/read.php?f=101&i=10002&t=10002>.

## Prothonotary Warblers at Hoover Reservoir

**Charlie Bombaci**

6715 Henschen Circle, Westerville, OH 43082  
 charlesbombace@aol.com

One of the most splendid of the wood warblers, a male prothonotary warbler *Protonotaria citrea* is not shy about showing off his exquisite plumage as he forages along the margins of his territory, nor about declaring his reign from an exposed perch. His loud song rings through the air, a distinctive “sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet” on one pitch. A brilliant golden yellow, he is hard to miss, but that does not mean this species is easy to find. The prothonotary warbler is on the “Watch List” for Ohio birds and is usually found only in low numbers in suitable habitat around the state.

The cause of its scarcity is the loss of its habitat throughout the state. Prothonotary warblers prefer backwaters with a canopy of trees, damp and swampy river bottoms, and low-lying woods flooded at times and in which woodland pools are left by receding water. This type of land is often considered useless, and is destroyed for development and farmland.



This male prothonotary warbler at Hoover Reservoir should perhaps have been more grateful, but instead looks askance at the intrusion of benefactor and photographer Charlie Bombaci.

Prothonotary warblers are unique among the eastern warblers in nesting in cavities over or near water. They normally nest in natural cavities such as abandoned woodpecker holes in stumps 2-12 feet above water. While abandoned downy woodpecker holes are the sites most commonly chosen in Ohio, the warbler will nest in natural openings in dead branches or the broken top of a stump. When suitable cavities are unavailable, the birds will also nest in bluebird-type boxes located along narrow waterways. The availability of suitable cavities is the most critical habitat requirement for breeding prothonotaries.

Cavities are not, however, the only habitat feature required by the species. Generally essential for their presence are an abundance of willows and the proximity of water. Prothonotary warblers are rarely found far from the latter, whether a slow-running river or creek, a large wooded lake or—the species’ favorite—flooded bottomland forests.