

Documentation
Swainson's Warbler
(*Limnothlypis Swainsonii*)

Rick P. Counts

Saturday (April 27, 1985) was here and that only meant one thing: warblers and other newly arriving passerines should be in central Ohio. So at 6 A.M., I arrived at Greenlawn Cemetary and awaited daybreak with great anticipation. Just last year (April 26, 1984), this area was loaded with warblers after an overflight the night before. One Hundred Nine species were here on that day in 5 hours of birding. I hoped that history would repeat itself. Boy, was I ever in for a surprise!

The first two hours of birding were very slow with few species and very low individual totals. A very familiar birding trip in the Spring of 1985. Twelve species of warblers were tallied with very few vireos and thrushes. Two Carolina wrens were seen in the dump section of the cemetary, but they have been here for the last two years. White-throated sparrows were probably the most common bird here today. My hopes of a good day were slowly slipping away.

Then my luck changed 180 degrees. My second trip to the pit (a man-made pond) found few birds, but a nice male hooded warbler did catch my eye. While I was looking at this bird, fellow birdwatcher, Cecelia (C.C.) Johnson, came up to me and said she had a bird at the bridge that would be a life lister for her. She wondered if I could come to the bridge and verify a Swainson's warbler she had found while looking for an ovenbird. She said four other birders were still there holding the bird in sight. "A Swainson's warbler," I exclaimed! "I don't even have that bird on my life list." Off to the bridge we went.

On the way over, I was skeptical about the bird. I wondered what else it could be. A Swainson's warbler in Columbus seemed too rare. We were there in five minutes and the other birders were pointing to the ground at some leaves under a large lilac bush. I slowly made my way there and saw the bird flipping over dead leaves feeding on the ground. It reminded me of a worm-eating warbler the way it fed. Now, to get my glasses on that bird. I quickly picked him up and I was actually looking at a Swainson's warbler! A life lister found in central Ohio. I let out a yell and took my glasses down and slowly rubbed my eyes. I still couldn't believe that I was looking at a Swainson's warbler. I looked at a Peterson's Field Guide to be sure and there was no doubt in my mind what I was seeing. Dark brown crown, cream eye stripe, uniform creamy brown tail, rump, back and nape, cream-colored breast, sides and belly, a creamy-colored throat which showed a golden glow in direct sunlight and white undertail coverts. It matched the field guide.

It was time to spread the news to other birders. C.C. took me to a nearby phone to contact other people about the find. I told Todd Dawson and Mike Gibbons of the bird on the way out of the cemetary and they headed in that direction. Five phone calls found no one at home, so it was time to head back to the cemetary for further study of the bird.

We arrived to find 30 other birders near the area where the bird was



Swainson's warbler at Greenlawn Cemetary, Columbus, Ohio
April 28, 1985 photographed by Tom Bartlett.

last seen. Soon it was relocated and fed in the open for all to see. It put on a good show and seemed to show little fear. I enjoyed its cooperation and decided to stay at Greenlawn for the rest of the day. I was the babysitter and could help other birders find the bird. After all, who could get tired of looking at it? Especially when it was a lifer.

I stayed the remainder of the day and had a total of five hours of continuous viewing time. The closest I got was about 7 feet away. Many other birders got an opportunity to see the warbler (about 250 on Saturday and another 300 on Sunday). Birders from all over Ohio came and were rewarded with fine views. I thought how odd it was to see birders from northern Ohio in Greenlawn Cemetary to see a bird! On Monday morning, the bird could not be found and to my knowledge has not been seen since.

This was probably a first for Columbus to see all of this birding traffic in town. It was an enjoyable experience, and I'm thankful that everyone who looked for the bird found it.

I may never see a Swainson's warbler again, so this memory will remain with me forever.

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Editor

This record of the Swainson's warbler is the only Ohio photographic record of this species. Trautman (1968) reports a specimen taken June 21, 1947, in Lawrence County by Green and now preserved in the Ohio State Museum (#7839).

The Ornithology Committee of the Dayton Audubon Society (1984), states that Jim Hill saw this species on April 22, 1961 near Englewood Dam in a wooded ravine "under very favorable conditions." "The foliage had not greatly advanced, so the bird could be well seen as it remained at lower levels. Its song was readily compared with the song of a nearby Louisiana Waterthrush and the bird was under observation for many minutes. A search for this bird on the following day was fruitless."

Newman (1969) reports a sight record in Huntington Reservation (Cuyahoga County) on May 12, 1963 (without further information). Thomson (1983) states that the observer of this record is unknown. Thomson also gives four other sight records as follows (total information given):

"one, 18 May 1971 near Chardon, Geauga County (Spare);
another near Chardon, 13 May 1972 (Martin); one, 12 May
1975 at Firestone Park, Summit County (Biscan), and
one in late May 1976 at East Liverpool, Columbiana
County (N. Laitsch)."

- Newman, D. L., 1969. A Field Book of Birds of the Cleveland Region. The Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Cleveland, Ohio. pp. 14.
- Ornithology Committee of the Dayton Audubon Society. 1984. Birds of Dayton. Landfall Press, Dayton, Ohio. pp. 134.
- Thomson, T. 1983. Birding in Ohio. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. pp. 223.
- Trautman, M. B. and M. A. 1968. Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio. The Ohio Journal of Science 68 (5): 316.