

NOTES ON SWAINSON'S WARBLER IN CENTRAL GEORGIA

BY BROOKE MEANLEY

Plate 18

THE Ocmulgee River bottom of central Georgia, with its cane-fringed streams, rank undergrowth and bountiful deciduous forests, presents the ideal habitat for the breeding of Swainson's Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*). The bottomland actually begins at the Fall Line near the city of Macon, and follows the muddy Ocmulgee for many miles southward beyond the Bibb County line. The river itself eventually merges with the Oconee to form the Altamaha which enters the sea near Brunswick, Georgia.

To find Swainson's Warbler in this country, one must seek it in the vast canebrakes which are scattered along the tributaries that feed the river, or look for it about stagnant ponds where the dark woodland, with its rank growth of immature cane, greenbrier, and herbaceous plants, presents a rather perplexing picture and one that might be passed up by the ornithologist seeking a more attractive section of the woods. Cane in a mature or immature form *must* be present, and I know of no occasion when I have seen or heard this warbler on its breeding grounds that a growth of cane was not in sight.

Once its haunts are discovered the bird is not difficult to find. It stays in the midst of the canebrake or thicket, seldom coming into the open. However, its presence can easily be detected once its song or *tchip* is heard. One merely has to penetrate the canebrake or work about its border to see the little brown bird which can readily be detected from the slight rustling it makes in the leaves or from its motion as it works a few feet up from the ground among the cane stalks or weed stems.

Three distinct breeding territories, varying markedly in floral type, were worked during the spring and summer of 1944. Areas No. 1 and No. 2, as they are termed below, are quite unlike the supposedly typical Swainson's Warbler breeding ground, while Area No. 3 was anticipated as a nesting type many months before the birds were first noted there.

Area No. 1, where the first bird was seen, lies along the border of the bottomland. In some respects, the woodland here approaches the eastern upland type. Large tulip trees, water oaks, sweet gums, loblolly pines and dogwood are common. Small growths of cane, some four feet high, are scattered throughout the area, becoming more concentrated along the small streams and ditches that have been dug

as a measure of controlling mosquitoes. From January until the latter part of April, most of this area was inundated. During the flooded period, on March 31, the first Swainson's Warbler of the spring season was noted.

From my notes I find that, during the last week of March, the spring woodland was at the height of its grandeur. The dogwood had been in flower for several weeks, the azalea was in full bloom and most of the trees were foliated with small leaves. In the flooded bottom, the Louisiana Water-thrush was the most vociferous of the passerine birds and had been in the magnolia swamp near-by since the second week in March. The White-eyed Vireo reached this locale only several days later. Lincoln's Sparrow was a rare migrant recently seen; and the Black and White Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Bachman's Sparrow, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher were among the new arrivals of the past two weeks. Lingering winter species were the Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-throated Sparrow, Palm Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Rusty Blackbird and Winter Wren.

The migrant Swainson's Warbler, noted on March 31, was walking about the floating debris, probing beneath the matted leaves and twigs. The bird was quite tame and kept only 15 feet ahead of me as I pursued it. The cane rushes here were very dense, and the stalks a quarter of an inch in diameter and approximately seven feet in height. However, the area was no longer a normal nesting place since that part of the woods would be dry in a few days.

A cold wave during the second week in April momentarily put a damper on migration, and it was not until the fifteenth of the month that a second Swainson's Warbler was seen. This bird was noted some 200 yards from the place where the first one was on the 31st. The immediate area, some 75 feet square, was the most fertile part of the woods, and there were more birds there than in near-by sections. It was a wet, sloping thicket with a small scattering of cane rushes, some alder, briar, poison sumac, farkleberry, small red maple, sweet gum, magnolia and cinnamon fern, with a mosquito-control ditch running along the side of it.

I was first attracted by the Swainson's sharp and distinguishable *tchip* from an alder branch at the edge of the thicket. The bird did not remain in that position long but hopped to the ground where it began feeding. I had no trouble in following it closely. I usually placed myself in front of it, allowing it to work toward me, to see how close it would come. Frequently, as I lay close to the ground, it would walk up within reach, look up for a second, and simply walk around

me or fly a few feet away to resume feeding. It seemed to be annoyed rather than frightened.

During its first few days in this habitat, the bird remained on the ground most of the time, walking about like an Ovenbird, sometimes hopping in the manner of the Kentucky Warbler, as it thrust its beak unhesitatingly beneath leaves and twigs in search of ground beetles, its favorite food. Unlike the smooth maneuvering of the Ovenbird, which it more closely resembled in habits at that time of the year than any other ground warbler, it walked about rapidly, covering very little ground, with the posterior part of its body trembling and often jerking as if the bird were chilled. (In contrast, Swainson's Warblers observed in other areas often had a smooth gait.) It seldom ventured into a clearing, remaining in the thickest part of the brush in the wet places and feeding among the ferns and briar.

Until about April 22, it sang sporadically, most of the time from the ground, singing every fifteen or twenty minutes, although at times it did not sing for two hours and then had a tendency to sing only when other birds started singing. It was so wrapped up in its song that it was absolutely unconcerned as it sang at my very feet, with its head thrown back until its beak pointed perpendicularly toward the sky, and it poured forth its resounding melody in the best warbler fashion.

On the 23rd, it was the most vociferous of the warblers in that patch of woods. It sang throughout the day but was more exuberant in the early morning and after 5:00 P. M. Its singing was no more eccentric than that of the Kentucky and Hooded Warblers that were sharing the same habitat, although it has the reputation of being an unpredictable singer.

Since no other Swainson's Warblers had been noted in the vicinity, I concluded, on April 25, that the bird was a bachelor. It had returned to its old nesting territory to serenade a potential mate that was never to put in an appearance, as continued observation throughout the nesting season proved. The preceding year's nest was located in a blackberry bush the first day the warbler was observed in this habitat, and for several weeks after its arrival in this territory it continued to work most of the time within a few feet of the old nest.

I noticed that this bachelor bird had gradually extended its territory a few yards and was now singing and working over an area 80 yards in length and 50 yards wide. It sang frequently from dead branches in trees at an average height of twenty feet, yet it still spent considerable time singing from the ground. I noticed that it usually sang two or three times from one perch and then flew or walked to another near-by, continuing in song. It remained in each tree on an average of ten minutes.

On May 3, I entered the woods at 7 A. M., noting that there were many Cape May Warblers in the area, and immediately heard and saw the Swainson's Warbler singing every few seconds from the lower dead branches of a large white oak. The bird remained in that tree for some ten minutes, then flew to a near-by black gum and continued singing. In flying from one station to another it flew for longer distances than do the Hooded and Kentucky Warblers and also flew at a greater over-all height (10-20 feet).

At 7 A. M. on May 10, the bird was still singing its heart out, and on a perch fifteen feet from the ground it continued singing without a pause as I walked directly under it.

I continued to check the movements of this bird through May and June, and on June 19 it still had no mate, although it still sang vociferously. After this date I made only infrequent trips to the area. The bird was seldom heard after the first of July.

Area No. 2 was one of the most unattractive woodland types that I have ever worked. The entire area was covered with brushy cane intertwined with grape vines and greenbrier among which were strewn pieces of drift debris left behind by the spring floods. The section was cool and well shaded by a mature mixed wood, chiefly of hackberry with some ash-leaved maple, red maple, tupelo, sweet gum, swamp chestnut oak, water oak and white ash. A stagnant stream, that was slowly drying up, wound through the entanglement and emptied into a small lake. When I entered this area for the first time on May 11, several Swainson's Warblers were singing concurrently. Near the stream in the cane, I noticed three birds flying not too briskly about, chasing each other.

I felt that the birds should be nesting by this time and so began searching for nests. On the evening of May 15, not more than ten minutes after I entered the woods, I found a nest containing one egg in a cane stalk six feet from the ground. There was no incubating bird on the nest at that time, but two birds were heard *tchipping* about 30 yards away. I paid especial attention to their *tchip* notes and found that they somewhat resembled the sharp note of the Phoebe, varying at times to resemble the Wood Pewee, Kentucky Warbler, and Swamp Sparrow. The notes were distinctly different from those of other warblers.

A second nest, unoccupied, was discovered shortly afterwards about 200 yards from Nest No. 1. This nest also was in cane and only four feet from the ground. A male was singing 30 feet away—a habit that was consistent throughout the nesting territories.

I continued to work the area in its entirety and found that three

pairs of Swainson's Warblers inhabited it. These three pairs were the crowning glory in their environment, completely overshadowing associated species, Kentucky, Hooded and Prothonotary Warblers, Acadian Flycatcher and Cardinal, in their resounding and impressive song and the greater extent of their flight about the area.

On May 18, Nest No. 1 contained three eggs, and the female was on the nest when I approached, flushing only when my hand was one foot from her. She fluttered to the ground, scurrying along somewhat like the Kentucky Warbler, and then flew about 30 yards away. It *tchipped* only two or three times, did not seem flustered or too concerned over its disturbance and made no attempt to return. A third nest was found that day. This nest, unoccupied and similarly situated, was placed about 200 yards from nests Nos. 2 and 3, so that the three nests formed the apexes of a nearly perfect equilateral triangle.

As I approached the occupied nest on May 21, I heard the male singing approximately 30 yards from the nest. I walked up to the nest and touched it before the female flew off. It still contained three eggs.

On May 27, three pairs were still present in the area and three males were singing. When one of them sang, the other two followed in close succession. The nest containing three eggs was intact, but the incubating bird was not on it and did not seem to be near-by. On the 28th, I concluded that the nest was deserted as there was still no bird about the nest and the eggs were cold. However, the male was still singing near-by.

The area was not visited again until June 19 when, accompanied by J. Fred Denton of Augusta, Georgia, I visited Nest No. 3. It contained two young birds approximately one-third grown. The male was singing near the nest. After we had partially concealed ourselves some 30 feet away, one of the birds came within a few feet of the nest, *tchipped* a few times, but did not feed its offspring, apparently wary of our presence. It finally flew off, not to return so long as we remained.

Area No. 3 is, indeed, the type in which one would expect to find Swainson's Warbler. The bird was more abundant here than in any other locale visited, but due to the density of the canebrake, was more difficult to see than in Areas Nos. 1 and 2. This area marks the beginning of an almost unbroken tract of mature cane some 30 feet in height, 25 to 50 feet in breadth, that grows up to the slope of the bank of a stream which it follows for about two miles. The floor of the brake is generally bare since the solid growth of cane allows little room for herbaceous vegetation or scrub growth, and one has to seek its borders to find a diversity in plant life. However, the canebrake is enveloped by a mature forest of sweet gum, water and swamp

chestnut oak, hackberry and white ash which provides the primary covering that is a factor in blotting out the light in this typically dark and dampened woodland which exemplifies the habit of Swainson's Warbler.

In this canebrake, birds that were associated with Swainson's Warbler in the other areas studied were generally absent, and only along the border of the brake and in the tree-tops of the hardwoods the Red and White-eyed Vireos, Prothonotary, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, Louisiana Water-thrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Pewee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Cardinal were found. The absence of Spanish moss in this region accounts for the uncommonness of the Parula Warbler. Two nests of the current year were found on May 22, but neither was occupied at the time.

Nests in the three areas were examined to note their construction and composition. Most of them were similarly constructed and conformed to descriptions given by other observers. They were light but firm in build and might remind one of a combination of the nests of the Veery and Indigo Bunting. The nests were composed largely of leaves, with the bowl lined with leaf petioles, small weed stalks, rootlets and an occasional pine needle. Every nest had cane leaves in its composition, and several that were found were composed entirely of cane leaves. Other leaves used were sweet gum, elm, hornbeam, tupelo gum, and red maple. Some blackish material in the lining of most of the nests proved to be stalks of red maple fruits.

Post-nesting data.—The birds became very retiring after the breeding season, confining themselves to the darker parts of thicket and forest, and were seldom heard. For this reason they were not easy to observe. However, when located they were quite easily approached. An individual bird was heard singing in Area No. 2 on the evenings of August 10, 13, 19, and 27. On the evening of August 29, in Area No. 3, I heard my last Swainson's song of the year. These warblers in decreasing numbers were present in the bottomland until September 16, after which date I have no records of their occurrence.

During the latter part of August, when the waves of warblers were coming through its territory, the Swainson's paid little attention to the migrant *Comptoslypidae*, and only on one occasion did I see a single Swainson's associating with them. The species is individualistic; the tendency for other birds to associate with it, rather than the reverse, seemed to hold true throughout most of the summer.

Status in Ocmulgee bottom.—From this observer's experience, Swainson's Warbler was found to be a common summer resident wherever a suitable habitat prevailed in the Ocmulgee bottomland. In prac-

tically every patch of cane in which I worked, a pair of these birds or a small colony was found breeding. Once the habitat was located and an individual noted, it was a none too difficult task to find additional birds. The most definite clue to the presence of Swainson's Warbler in a suitable environment in the spring, was its distinctive song—one that stood out above that of any other member of its family.

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BARROW'S GOLDEN-EYE IN MASSACHUSETTS

BY LUDLOW GRISCOM

IN a recent interesting article on the Barrow's Golden-eye in eastern North America (*Auk*, 61: 544-554, Oct., 1944), Dr. A. M. Hasbrouck amasses evidence to prove that this little-known species is by no means as rare as stated in most general works of reference. The article appears to me to be open to minor criticism in the method adopted, and the author's inevitable lack of detailed local knowledge has led him into minor geographical errors and unwitting duplication of records. Moreover it was quite impossible for him to make any general or summary statements.

It so happens that the coast of Massachusetts lies within the normal and regular winter range of the relatively small population of the Barrow's Golden-eyes of eastern North America. Twenty years of intensive modern observation by well over 100 individuals per annum gives us a picture of the status of the species in this state, which is, I think, well worth bringing out, but which, naturally enough, Dr. Hasbrouck was unable to do.

Dr. Hasbrouck states that a search of the literature and the replies to his questionnaire yielded a total of 244 records from Massachusetts. He prints only 29 of these, of which nearly one-third are accidental duplications. If the number of individuals is added up, the total is far higher than 244. While I do not know how he arrived at 244 records, or on what basis he printed what would appear to be 29 of