

Sutton's Warbler in West Virginia

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On June 3, 1975, an ornithological event of some note occurred in West Virginia. On that date a Sutton's Warbler, *Dendroica potamac*, was identified in Raleigh County.

Field guides have described and pictured the Sutton's Warbler. Undoubtedly it once occurred in a less restricted range, but historically it has been known to inhabit only the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. The last verified occurrence was recorded over 36 years ago, by Carl Haller, in May, 1939, when he collected a male and a female, approximately 18 miles apart, twelve miles north of Martinsburg, West Virginia.

For many years a group of West Virginia birders, dubbed "The Sutton's Seekers" have annually made unsuccessful field trips to Harpers Ferry in search of this elusive bird. Additionally, the Brooks Bird Club of Wheeling yearly conducts a two-week ecological exploration in different areas throughout West Virginia. Their purpose is to collect detailed ecological data with emphasis on birds. In 1975, the excursion ("foray") was held in Raleigh County, commencing May 31.

After several days characterized by normal activities, events took an unexpected turn. Several members of the birding group heard a bird vocalization typical of a Northern Parula except that the song was uttered twice each time the bird sang. The Northern Parula does not repeat its song. The Sutton's Warbler does. Recognition of this nuance stands as testimony to the expertise of these birders. None had ever heard or seen a Sutton's Warbler, but the song was being sung about 200 miles from where one might expect to hear it.

Immediately the "super-experts" were called in and the augmented group tracked the song until, in mid-afternoon, they found the singer. It closely resembled a Yellow-throated Warbler, but

lacked the black streaks bordering the breast. The back had a suffused greenish-yellow wash not found on the Yellow-throated Warbler. It was indeed a Sutton's Warbler.

As luck would have it, on June 5, the male Sutton's was netted, seen by some sixty enthusiastic birders, extensively photographed, banded, and finally released the following morning. It was still in the area when the "foray" left the area on June 11.

Where have Sutton's Warblers been for the last third of a century? More interestingly, is this bird a distinct species, a subspecies, or a hybrid? Many ornithologists contend that *Dendroica potamac* is the Yellow-throated X Parula hybrid. But if *potamac* is a hybrid, why has it been found only in one tiny corner of the much larger area in which the two "parent" species' breeding ranges overlap? And if it is a hybrid, might we not expect other color forms to be found, as in the numerous variations to be found in the Blue-winged X Golden-winged hybrids? On the other hand, if Sutton's is a true species, how has such an obviously minute population managed to survive all these years? The next helpful step, obviously, will be to discover and study a breeding pair.

Although speculation is fascinating, the answers to the questions raised by the rediscovery are not alone in importance. The real excitement has more to do with birders suddenly being caught off guard by a perfectly healthy specimen of a species thought to be extinct, and the jubilant vindication of that steadfast group known as "The Sutton's Seekers."

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