

Crescent-chested Warbler in Arizona

A first for the United States

Daniel R. Heathcote and Kenn Kaufman

WHILE BIRDING alone at Garden Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains, Cochise County, Arizona, at about 9:00 a.m. MST on September 3, 1983, Heathcote discovered a warbler that he could not identify. Being familiar with almost all of the North American warblers, he realized immediately that this bird must be something unusual; its combination of bright yellow throat and breast, gray, unmarked wings, and gray head with bold white supercilium ruled out every warbler species known to occur in the area. The warbler was very cooperative, foraging in a limited area for 15 minutes and affording excellent views, sometimes from as close as two meters. The observation ended when the mystery bird chased away a female Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*) that had been foraging in the same area.

After unsuccessfully attempting to relocate the bird, Heathcote wrote a detailed description of it and then drove to the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve, a few miles away. There, consultation of a Mexican field guide (Peterson and Chalif 1973) revealed that the bird was a Crescent-chested Warbler (*Parula superciliosa*, formerly classified in the genus *Vermivora*), a species new not only for Arizona but for the United States.

The Arizona birders were alerted—not an easy task in the midst of a Labor Day weekend—and early on September 4, about 30 observers, including the authors, arrived at Garden Canyon to seek the warbler. On this day, however, the bird proved elusive. At about 8:10 a.m., Kaufman heard a chip note that aroused his suspicion; pursuing it, he and Phil Norton had a brief but excellent view of the Crescent-chested Warbler. Other observers were summoned, but as the first ones arrived, the bird flew. Much to everyone's dismay, the bird could not be relocated. Although many searched for most of the day, the warbler was not seen again on the 4th, and there were no definite sightings on the 5th.

At this point the unsuccessful searchers were losing hope, and it appeared that



Crescent-chested Warbler, Garden Canyon, Huachuca Mountains, Arizona, September 11, 1983. Photo/Sherman Suter.

the record might be doomed to hypothetical status. Determined to give it another chance we returned to Garden Canyon early on September 6, and on this date we were more fortunate. Kaufman found the Crescent-chested Warbler at 6:50 a.m., and the authors, joined by Sharon Goldwasser, watched the bird for more than five minutes before losing sight of it. We saw it again briefly at 8:25 a.m. This time it eluded us quickly, but it now seemed to be associating with a large flock of Bridled Titmice (*Parus wollweberi*) and other birds. Following the flock, Heathcote relocated the warbler at 8:50 a.m., and for the next 45 minutes, Goldwasser, Robert T. Smith and the authors had the bird under almost continuous observation, part of the time at very close range.

The following description is compiled from our field notes, taken during and immediately after observation (Heathcote on September 3 and 6, Kaufman on September 6 and 11).

Size and shape: A medium-sized to small warbler, the bird appeared virtually the same size as a Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*) in direct com-

parison. It was similar to a Nashville Warbler in shape, giving the impression of being slightly short-tailed or small-headed proportionately, the latter impression possibly enhanced by the very finely pointed bill.

General impression: In casual views, the bird appeared neither brightly colored nor strongly patterned. At any distance the most noticeable feature was the distinct white supercilium.

Plumage: The forehead, crown, and ear coverts were medium gray with a slightly bluish tinge. The loreal area was slightly darker gray, especially at the upper edge where it met the beginnings of the supercilium. The pure white supercilium was sharply contrasting and conspicuous, running back well past the posterior edge of the ear coverts, becoming broader behind the eye and then narrowing again rearward. Sometimes the supercilium appeared to end in a narrow point, but sometimes it appeared more truncated, probably depending on the arrangement of individual feathers. A very narrow white crescent bordering the lower edge of the eye was visible only at very

close range. A short, narrow, poorly defined and pale median stripe on the forehead, which we never saw in the field, was visible in a couple of photographs. The blue-gray of the ear coverts faded a little to a duller and slightly paler gray on the side of the neck; this gray extended ventrally very slightly at the base of the throat, notching into the yellow of the underparts at the approximate division between throat and breast. The throat and breast were fairly bright yellow. At its greatest extent, the yellow came down the breast to a point even with the greater wing coverts; so that when the bird faced the observer the lower edge of the yellow had a double-rounded look. Most of the underparts were dull white, smudged with pale gray on the undertail coverts and somewhat on the breast just below the yellow area. Sometimes the division between the yellow and white on the underparts seemed sharply demarcated, but sometimes it appeared more evenly blended, probably depending on the arrangement of feathers and/or on light conditions. The bird lacked the chestnut-colored crescent on the chest, but sometimes, at close range, there appeared to be a hint of orange or a pale wash of rufous across the breast. There was also a faint and limited suffusion of olive gray at the sides of the upper breast. The upper back, scapulars, lower back, and rump were a fairly bright olive green, blending smoothly into gray on the lower nape. The uppertail coverts were olive-green like the rump. There was some gray in the scapulars where they met the wings. The tail was noticeably notched, medium gray above and pale gray below, with very narrow white edging to the inner webs of the outer rectrices, visible only at very close range. The wings were medium gray with a slight bluish tinge, virtually unmarked. A pale mark on the leading edge near the bend of the wing was sometimes visible; a similar mark occurs on the Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*). On the left wing there were a couple of very small whitish spots in the area of the lesser coverts, possibly owing to missing feathers.

Soft parts: The bill was moderately deep at the base (for a warbler), tapering to a very fine needle point. The upper mandible was solid black or blackish, the lower mandible pale at the base (yellow-pink) with a dark tip. The eyes were dark. The legs and feet were dull yellow-orange.

Voice: The call note was a rather quiet *schip* or *ship*, vaguely reminiscent of the

Orange-crowned Warbler but softer, more sibilant and slightly more full-toned. No other warbler present in Garden Canyon had a similar note, but some calls of the Bridled Titmouse were quite close.

Actions: Rather deliberate for a warbler, the bird sometimes remained in one tree for more than ten minutes, often foraging on a single branch for a minute or more at a time. Sometimes it was seen to hang upside down while examining the undersides of leaves. Once (in alarm?), when responding to owl calls, it was seen to flick the wings and tail repeatedly, but this was not usual behavior.

Age and sex: There is a broad tendency for the "chest crescent" of this species to be more fully developed on males than on females; so the Garden Canyon bird, lacking this mark altogether, was very likely a female. Although it may have been a young bird in first basic plumage, it was certainly not in juvenal plumage, which is marked in this species by pale wing-bars and a brownish cast to the upperparts. However, most warblers wear juvenal plumage for only a very short time, and seldom wander far before the post-juvenal molt.

WHEN THE Crescent-chested Warbler was first seen on September 3 and 4, and during the first observation on September 6, it was either alone or loosely associated with a few other warblers such as Nashville, Wilson's (*Wilsonia pusilla*), or Black-throated Gray. In all subsequent observations, however, it was associated with a large flock of Bridled Titmice and other birds that ranged up and down the canyon over a distance of at least one-half a kilometer. This flock spent much time in the mixed stands of oak (*Quercus*), Arizona Sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*), juniper (*Juniperus*), Arizona Walnut (*Juglans major*) and other trees along and near the stream, but it also moved into the scattered oaks high on the adjacent grassy hillsides. Like the titmice, the Crescent-chested Warbler was seen foraging in all the tree species here named.

The last sightings of the warbler were on September 15, and intensive searching on September 17 and 18 failed to turn it up. During its stay, the bird was seen by dozens of observers; good photographs were obtained by John Saba, Sherman Suter and others. Some of these photographs have been deposited in the Arizona Bird Committee's photographic

documentation file, in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

The photographs and detailed description establish this as the first documented record of the Crescent-chested Warbler in the United States. However, we know of one previous probable sighting, that of a single bird seen by Donald J. LaFontaine and T.W. Thormin on May 10, 1970, near Falcon Dam in extreme southern Texas. Although the record was never verified, the brief details with the report in *Birding* (Tucker 1971) suggest that the identification was correct. Interestingly, the Texas bird (like the one in Arizona) was described as lacking the "crescent" on the breast that gives this species its English name.

IN NORTHEASTERN Mexico, the Crescent-chested Warbler is found quite close to the Texas border. It is fairly common in the Sierra Picachos, a range in northern Nuevo León within sight of Falcon Dam (J.C. Arvin, *pers. comm.*), which lends plausibility to the Texas sighting mentioned above. But the northern limits of the species' range in northwestern Mexico are not known in detail, chiefly because the mountains along the Sonora-Chihuahua border are relatively inaccessible and have not been thoroughly explored by ornithologists. The species has been found at least as far north as the region east of Tezopaco, Sonora, a little over 200 miles south of the Arizona border (S.M. Russell, *vide* G. Monson). It may well occur regularly farther north. Observers should watch for it in southern Arizona and elsewhere near the Mexican border.

AS THIS manuscript neared completion, we learned of the remarkable second chapter in Arizona's experience with this species. On April 28, 1984, Jerry Bock discovered a Crescent-chested Warbler in Ramsey Canyon of the Huachuca Mountains, only a few miles from the site of our observations in Garden Canyon. Because the bird was found on sensitive private land, its presence was not widely publicized; but continued observation revealed that two birds, evidently a mated pair, were present at least until May 17 and possibly into June. Most intriguing was the report by Tom Gatz and Marty Jakle, who watched the birds for an hour on May 16: both members of the pair were seen foraging for insects and then carrying the insects up the hillside, as if to feed young birds.

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A sight record of the Crescent-chested Warbler from lowland Sonora

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THE CRESCENT-CHESTED WARBLER (*Parula superciliosa*) is a species of humid mountain forests, including pine-oak and broadleaf dominated associations of Mexico and Central America (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Although it is generally considered a resident throughout its range, a recent record for Arizona (Heathcote and Kaufman, this issue) and the sight record reported here indicate that this little-known species may at least occasionally wander or disperse outside its known range.

On December 24, 1977, I observed a Crescent-chested Warbler in riparian habitat along the Río Yaqui at Highway 15 in Sonora, Mexico. The bird was feeding with a mixed flock in the middle and upper canopy of cottonwood (*Populus*) and willow (*Salix*). The flock included Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*), Orange-crowned Warblers (*Vermivora celata*), Black-throated Gray Warblers (*Dendroica nigrescens*), a Wilson's Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*), Ruby-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus calendula*), a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*), and a Solitary Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*).

When first glimpsed, the bird was in the upper canopy, and a ventral view brought to mind a Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) or a Tropical Parula (*P. pitayumi*). The former species occurs sporadically in Sonora, while the latter is relatively common in southern Sonora. However, when this bird was seen more clearly, a bold white supercilium was evident. This characteristic is lacking in the other two members of this genus. The bird's overall size appeared close to that of nearby Orange-crowned Warblers, but

the general shape differed somewhat, in that the bird appeared slightly smaller, perhaps longer-billed, with a more rounded breast and a more slimly tapered posterior. The entire head and nape appeared gray, broken only by a highly contrasting white supercilium that widened posteriorly. The wings were dark, contrasting with a bright green upper back. No wingbars were evident. The throat, upper breast, and upper sides were bright, clear yellow with a small, ovoid, reddish smudge on the upper breast. The rest of the underparts were white. The underside of the tail showed a fair amount of white. The upper surface of the tail was not seen well.

The occurrence of this species in Sonora was predicted by Sutton (1951), but to date, very few records exist for this Mexican state. Further, this species is typically found at much higher elevations than this near sea-level occurrence (4,000 to 11,000 feet; Skutch 1979, Binford 1968); this sight record may represent a new low-elevation occurrence as well.

Based upon other observations during the winter months, this occurrence is not entirely out of character for this species in northwestern Mexico. Wintering individuals are often found in numbers in flocks with other wood warblers, especially with North American migrants that winter in Mexico. Relatively large numbers of Crescent-chested Warblers have been found within a single flock in the broadleaf forest of the Rancho Liebre Baranca, Sinoloa, during the non-breeding season (Terrill *pers. obs.*; G. Rosenberg, K. Rosenberg *pers. comm.*). This phenomenon may be interpreted as evidence

of regular dispersal or migration, although it does not reveal the proportion of the population that disperses, nor the distance involved. Finally, the subspecies *V. s. sodalis*, which breeds in northwestern Mexico, has been regarded as a partial migrant by Miller *et al.* (1957)

The Río Yaqui flows out of the Sierra Madre Occidental at its northern terminus. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this individual warbler followed the riparian habitat downstream. Winter conditions can be quite intolerable for an insectivorous bird in the northern Sierra Madre. Further, it is not unreasonable to expect future occurrences in lowland areas, especially in this type of situation, that is, in riparian areas along rivers that flow out of high mountains, especially at the northern end of the range of the Crescent-chested Warbler.

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