

SUMMER BIRD RECORDS FROM ASHE AND ALLEGHANY COUNTIES, NORTH CAROLINA

CHRIS MARSH, HARRY LeGRAND JR., AND WILLIAM BROWN JR.

Ashe County lies in the northwest corner of the state with Alleghany County due east of it. A majority of the records given here are from the Chestnut Hill Community, which is 4 miles S of the North Carolina-Virginia border. The region lies on a plateau of rolling hills having an average elevation between 2,000 and 2,700 feet. The North and South Forks of the New River join just north of this area, then flow into Virginia, and eventually into the Ohio River. The elevation of the riverbeds is about 2,500 feet. The New River watershed includes nearly all of Ashe County, and due to a proposed dam site downstream that would submerge the Chestnut Hill area, much of the habitat is abandoned farmland. Scattered stands of white pine (*Pinus strobus*) remain on hilltops, while mainly mature sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) and balm of Gilead (*Populus gileadensis*) line the riverbanks. All dates mentioned in this article are 1972 unless otherwise stated.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*): On the morning of 1 July while driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Alleghany County near milepost 232 (elevation 3,500 feet), Ross Silcock and Chris Marsh spotted two large falcons flying across the road. The first bird caught an updraft and then dipped below the treeline pursued by the second bird. Silcock observed the upperparts of the second bird to be metallic blue-gray. From the large size, falcon shape, and the confirming blue-gray back, both birds were identified as Peregrine Falcons. This section of the Parkway has precipitous areas, suggesting that the pair may have been breeding. Apparently the only breeding record in North Carolina is for Looking Glass Rock on the Pisgah Preserve (Malcolm Edwards, fide Chamberlain, 1954).

WILLOW FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax trailli*): Brown and Marsh discovered a pair of the "fitz-bew" species of Traill's Flycatcher on 7 June. The birds appeared to have a nest located along the bank of the North Fork of the New River. The pair made repeated trips to and from an alder bush bordering the opposite bank of the river. On 25 June Edmund LeGrand, Harry LeGrand, and Merrill Lynch found a singing male (fitz-bew variety) a few miles west of West Jefferson. The species is considered locally fairly common in summer just northwest of Ashe County in the vicinity of Abingdon, Virginia (Scott, 1966). These and other recently published sightings indicate that the Willow Flycatcher is extending its nesting range in the Appalachians, with the southernmost report to date being from Rabun County, Georgia (Mellinger, 1971).

LEAST FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax minimus*): In the Chestnut Hill area the Least Flycatcher is a fairly common summer resident, preferring the woodland strips bordering rivers and fields. While exploring both Forks of the New River on 7 June, Brown and Marsh heard eight birds calling. On 24 and 25 June Edmund LeGrand, Harry LeGrand, and Merrill Lynch recorded nine birds along the New River system in Ashe County. Except for the Highlands-Cashiers region of southwest North Carolina, the Least Flycatcher appears to be more numerous along the New River system than elsewhere in the state during the nesting season.

OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER (*Nuttallornis borealis*): On the morning of 29 May Brown observed an Olive-sided Flycatcher near Weaver's Ford, Ashe County. The white tufts behind the wings and the "vest pattern" on the breast were carefully noted as the bird perched on a dead pine tree. On one occasion the call notes "pip-pip-pip" were

heard. Near milepost marker 247 in Alleghany County (elevation 3,200 feet), Ross Silcock discovered an Olive-sided Flycatcher on 24 June. The bird was feeding over a stream in a ravine bordered on one side by white pine and on the other by a mixed pine-hardwood forest with a thick understory of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). All field marks were carefully observed. The bird was not singing, and it could not be found the next day or following weekend; therefore, it is presumed to have been a wandering, non-breeding bird.

Although the bird seen on 29 May was perhaps a late migrant, the bird observed on 24 June is one of the few recent summer records of Olive-sided Flycatcher in North Carolina outside of the Great Smoky Mountains. The low altitudes at which these birds were recorded are unusual, as most breeding season observations are made above 5,000 feet in spruce-fir forests.

WARBLING VIREO (*Vireo gilvus*): A moderate-sized breeding population of this species occurs along the New River system in northeastern Ashe County. On 22 May 1971 Brown found four singing males along the North and South Forks of the New River near the Chestnut Hill community. On 20 June 1971 he found a nest of this species along the North Fork. The following year Warbling Vireos were observed by a number of birders in the same vicinity. Three singing birds were noted by Brown on 29 May 1972, and three were again found on 7 June by Brown and Marsh. On 24 June Lynch and both LeGrands saw and heard five singing males and a probable juvenile following a male. All of these records were made in open deciduous groves adjacent to the two rivers, within 3 miles of the confluence of them.

The nesting status of the Warbling Vireo in North Carolina has never been well understood. Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley (1959) mentions that this species nested in Buncombe County in the 1890s and 1900s according to the records of Cairns, Davis, and Oberholser. This book gives no other nesting data for the state, and it is thus probable that Thomas Burleigh did not record the species at Asheville during his stay there in the early 1930s. However, Russell (1948) had a possible record of a Warbling Vireo and its nest at Chapel Hill on 30 May 1947. In addition to these records, others which suggest nesting in North Carolina are a bird seen scolding at North Wilkesboro on 8 July 1964 by Wendell P. Smith (Chamberlain, 1964) and a bird seen and heard along the Dan River near Madison in late May 1970 on a Breeding Bird Survey route by William Noonan (pers. com.).

The Ashe County records and the Madison record are not unexpected, because Warbling Vireos have been found nesting in nearby Virginia localities. Scott (1966) and others found the vireos to be fairly common in the lowlands of Washington County (just northeast of Ashe County) in June 1966 below 2,100 feet. Eggleston and Lyle (1952) listed the species as an uncommon summer resident in the Danville area just over the North Carolina line, 30 miles NE of Madison. The Warbling Vireo is essentially limited to the open woods along the larger rivers, and special search should be made for it along such rivers as the Dan, New, and French Broad.

NORTHERN ORIOLE (*Icterus galbula*): Along the New River water-system where mature deciduous trees border the river or a large stream, the Northern ("Baltimore") Oriole is a common summer resident. During the breeding season while the males are singing, the species' abundance is easily noted. On 22 May 1971, nine singing males were heard by Brown along the North Fork of the New River. During 6 hours of field work 20 singing males were noted on 7 June 1972 on the two forks and the tributaries of the New River by Brown and Marsh. Brown has found five nests in the past two breeding seasons (1971, 1972) in this area and has noted each time that they seem to prefer the balm-of-Gilead trees as nesting sites.

Even though Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley (1959) describe the Baltimore Oriole's nesting status as "not an uncommon summer resident west of the Blue Ridge," the scarcity of recent reports from the mountains suggests that it is now less numerous than stated above; therefore, the sizable population of Baltimore Orioles in the New River watershed is noteworthy.

DISCUSSION

The unusual abundance of the Least Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, and Baltimore Oriole in Ashe County is undoubtedly due to the large amount of suitable habitat supplied by the New River system. The rows of mature hardwoods along the roads and riverbanks bordering pastures and weedy fields offer the proper open country habitat frequented by these species.

The occurrence of the above three species in the same locale is most unusual for the North Carolina mountains because the vireo is usually found nesting in the southern Appalachians below 2,500 feet and the flycatcher generally above this elevation. The presence of these species together suggests that Ashe County is an intermediate zone between the true mountains of North Carolina (where Least Flycatchers and Baltimore Orioles nest) and the valleys of western Virginia (where the orioles and Warbling Vireos nest).

Recent summer records of Peregrine Falcons and Olive-sided Flycatchers in North Carolina are scarce and are primarily limited to the high altitude areas in the Great Smoky Mountains. Thus, the early summer records of these two species in Alleghany County are most unusual. Unfortunately no evidence of nesting could be found.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1213 Duplin Road. Raleigh, N.C. 27607; 331 Yadkin Drive, Raleigh, N.C.; and 415 Charles Court, Cary, N.C. 27511.

BRIEFS FOR THE FILES

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- LAPLAND LONGSPUR:** An unusually early occurrence was recorded 5 October on the North Carolina Outer Banks where a single bird was seen near Ocracoke Village by Paul DuMont and Paul Sykes. Seven were subsequently seen by Edmund LeGrand and Harry LeGrand at the southern tip of Hatteras Island on 23 November. The latter observers also found two at Pea Island on 24 November.
- SNOW BUNTING:** One was seen at Cedar Island, N.C., on 10 November by John Fussell. Other sightings were reported of one at Wrightsville Beach, N.C., on 15 November, Frances Needham, Ramona Snavely, et al.; two at Hatteras Island on 18 November, Don and Doris Cohrs; and two at Pea Island on 22 November, James Pullman.