

LATE SPRING ALONG THE SOUTHERN BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY—1973

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The authors, in company with D. Jean Tate, Brant Tate, Georgina Furlong and Saba von Sturbach, conducted field studies in parts of western North Carolina from 21 through 25 May 1973. Our observations were made primarily along the Blue Ridge Parkway as it passes through the counties of Swain, Jackson, Haywood, Transylvania, Henderson, Buncombe, and Yancey between the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) and Mount Mitchell State Park. We spent 25 May on Roan Mountain in Mitchell County. For details of the geographic features of this area, the reader might refer to "Topographic Map, Blue Ridge Parkway, Virginia and North Carolina (South Section)," prepared by the United States Department of the Interior.

In the present paper, the names of birds are those found in the *A. O. U. Check-list* (1957) and its Thirty-second Supplement (1973). Botanical names follow Radford, Ahles, and Bell (1968).

At this season (late May) there were prominent altitudinal differences in the stages of development of many plant species. As altitude increased and exposure worsened, most deciduous species showed retarded foliage development. At 3,000 feet the lowland pine-oak association became less common, being replaced with a mostly deciduous hardwood association of maples, oaks, beech, and some yellow birch (*Betula lutea*). Localities visited at these lower altitudes were seasonally well advanced. American Robins, Eastern Phoebe, and Red-eyed Vireos had nests with eggs. Foliage was well developed, and in many cases flowering had passed.

Rhododendrons and tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) continued up the slope with rhododendron extending to the tops of some of the highest peaks visited. At about 4,500 feet the hardwood association incorporated eastern hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) in the wet coves. At these elevations the hemlocks were dropping pollen. By 5,000 feet a distinct break in the vegetation was found. Foliage development had progressed little above this point. There was limited flowering among the understory shrubs (serviceberry—*Amelanchier arborea* var. *laevis*, blueberries—*Vaccinium* sp., and mountain winterberry—*Ilex ambigua* var. *montana*). Larger shrubs (redbud—*Cercis canadensis*, fire cherry—*Prunus pennsylvanica*) were flowering in abundance from 4,500 feet to 5,000 but did not show swelling buds above 5,000 feet. The association of hardwoods was composed of well-developed large trees between 4,500 feet and 5,000 feet. They contained much dead wood and held avifaunas consisting of winter residents, permanent residents, and a few hardy new arrivals.

Abruptly the plant life above 5,000 feet changed to high altitude forest with stunted yellow birches and beeches, a few northern conifers, and vegetated balds. These areas were still in the grip of late winter. There were only a few herbs showing signs of vegetation or bloom, shrubs were not showing bud swelling, and trees were dormant. The avifauna was composed of winter and permanent residents with a few of the early migrants. Ice and snow were not gone, but just being forgotten.

BIRD CHECKLIST

The following is a briefly annotated list of 53 species observed during the course of our work in western North Carolina.

Turkey Vulture (*Carthartes aura*)—One bird seen near Parkway Mile 462 (4,500 feet), Swain County, 22 May.

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)—One bird seen on the Parkway 2.7 miles S from the Mt. Pisgah Campground, Transylvania County, 22 May.

- American Woodcock (*Philohela minor*)—Flight-songs of this species were heard at Mt. Pisgah Campground (4,900 feet), Haywood County, on 22 May and on Roan Mountain at Carver's Gap (5,512 feet), Mitchell County, on 25 May. Simpson (1968, 1971) summarized the occurrence of this species in western North Carolina and reported it from both of those areas. Final evidence to prove the regular nesting of this species at these altitudes must await the discovery of eggs or young (see Simpson, 1968:38). The further observation of this bird in 1973, 10 years after Stupka's report (1963) and 5 years after Simpson's first report (1968), reduces the likelihood that the population represents any longer a recent influx of males due to habitat changes as suggested by Simpson (1968:38). All of our observations of singing males were in habitat other than the highway right-of-way Simpson regarded as responsible for their presence.
- Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)—One bird flew across the Parkway approximately 1 mile S of Craggy Gardens, Buncombe County, at 18:00 EDT on 23 May.
- Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)—One bird heard calling from near Parkway Mile 455, Swain County, at 13:00 EDT on 22 May.
- Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)—Five at Waterrock Knob (6,000 feet), Jackson County, 21 May and Craggy Gardens (5,300 feet), Buncombe County, 23 May.
- Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*)—One bird observed feeding from a dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) at junction of spur road to Heintooga Overlook and Blue Ridge Parkway (4,800 feet), Jackson County, on 21 May.
- Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway, but never above 4,900 feet.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)—Collected a breeding pair at Parkway Mile 455 (4,800 feet), Jackson County, on 21 May. Breeding status was determined by the presence of a shell-covered egg in the oviduct of the female. The habitat occupied by the birds was deciduous broadleaf forest with Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) on the wetter sites (Figure 1). Cairns (1889) reported this species as "common amongst the heavy timber" of Buncombe County and as a breeding bird in April in that county. Simpson (1972) reported the nesting of this species in several places in the mountains of western North Carolina. Curiously, none of the sites along the Parkway reported by Simpson was occupied by sapsuckers in late May. All of Simpson's localities are at higher elevations which were not occupied by summer residents at the dates of our list.
- Downy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos pubescens*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway. Because there was the call of a Downy Woodpecker superimposed on the prerecorded tape we used to find sapsuckers, Downy Woodpeckers were seen at every locality that we searched for sapsuckers, including at 5,800 feet at Craggy Gardens.
- Hairy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos villosus*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway. We listed five of these birds on a walk from Craggy Gardens to the Beetree Gap Picnic Area and back via the Parkway, Buncombe County, on 23 May.
- Acadian Flycatcher (*Empidonax virescens*)—Only at the south end of Tanbark Tunnel (3,500 feet), 10.1 miles S of Craggy Gardens, Buncombe County, 24 May.
- Eastern Wood Pewee (*Contopus virens*)—One bird at Parkway Mile 460 (4,700 feet), Jackson County, 22 May.
- Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*)—Two birds at Craggy Gardens (5,300 feet), Buncombe County, 24 May. C.S. Brimley (in Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley, 1942) lists a late spring departure date of 30 May 1886, for this species at Raleigh, and Stupka (1963) lists no spring dates after 30 April for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This species is absent from the Mt. Mitchell list of Simpson (1972).
- Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*)—Three at Waterrock Knob (6,000 feet), Jackson County, 21 May and Craggy Gardens (5,300 feet), Buncombe County, 23 May.
- Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)—Several at Roan Mountain (6,000 feet), Mitchell County, 25 May.



Figure 1. Nesting habitat of a pair of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers at the upper edge of the newly leafed-out broadleaf forest looking NNW at Parkway Mile 455, Jackson County, N.C., 21 May 1973.

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway, never above 5,000 feet.

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)—Three at Craggy Gardens (5,300 feet), Buncombe County, 23 May and one on Roan Mountain (6,000 feet), Mitchell County, 25 May.

Carolina Chickadee (*Parus carolinensis*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway, but not above 3,400 feet. No Black-capped Chickadees were found during this trip.

Tufted Titmouse (*Parus bicolor*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway, but never above 3,500 feet.

Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)—Parkway Mile 450, Jackson County (5,300 feet), 21 May and Roan Mountain (6,000 feet), Mitchell County, 25 May.

Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*)—Seen and heard at Parkway Mile 450 (5,300 feet), Jackson County, 21 May.

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)—Two heard at Craggy Gardens (5,300 feet), Buncombe County, 23 May.

Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)—Several heard at Mingus Mill, GSMNP (2,500 feet), Swain County, 22 May and Big Cove (2,000 feet), Haywood County, 21 May.

Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway, including the highest elevations visited.

Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*)—Mt. Pisgah Campground (4,900 feet), Haywood County, 23 May.

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)—Very numerous along most of the Parkway; nest with four eggs 10 feet up in a shadbush (*Amelanchier arborea* var. *laevis*) near Parkway Mile 462 (4,500 feet), Swain County, 22 May and nest with one day-old young

- and two eggs 12 feet up in a red spruce (*Picea rubens*) at Mt. Pisgah Campground (4,900 feet), Haywood County, 23 May.
- Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, including sites as low as 3,300 feet.
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliopitila caerulea*)—One heard near Parkway Mile 454 (4,600 feet), Jackson County, 21 May.
- Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*)—Seen and heard at higher elevations along the Parkway and on Roan Mountain, Mitchell County.
- Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)—Several seen at Oconaluftee Visitors' Center (2,000 feet), GSMNP, Swain County, 21 May and Balsam Gap (3,370 feet), Jackson County, 22 May.
- Solitary Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway. We listed eight singing birds on a walk from Craggy Gardens to the Beetree Gap Picnic Area and back via the Parkway, Buncombe County, on 23 May.
- Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, up to as high as 5,100 feet. It is interesting to note that Simpson (1972) reports this species only as a rare fall transient from the Mt. Mitchell area.
- Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, but not above 5,100 feet.
- Northern Parula (*Parula americana*)—One only at Smokemont Campground (2,300 feet), GSMNP, Swain County, 22 May.
- Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway. We listed six singing males of this species on a walk from Craggy Gardens to the Beetree Gap Picnic Area and back via the Parkway, Buncombe County, 23 May.
- Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, but not above 5,200 feet.
- Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway. Nest under construction in a blueberry (*Vaccinium vacillans*) at Mt. Pisgah Campground (4,900 feet), Haywood County, 23 May.
- Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, up to as high as 6,000 feet at Waterrock Knob.
- Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*)—One only at Mingus Mill (2,500 feet), GSMNP, Swain County, 22 May.
- Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*)—Two pairs of birds seen apparently on territory and searching for nesting sites about 1 mile S of Craggy Gardens along the Parkway (5,000 feet), Buncombe County, 23 May.
- House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)—Several seen, only at Oconaluftee Visitors' Center (2,000 feet), GSMNP, Swain County, 21 May.
- Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway.
- Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*)—Seen or heard at several locations along the Parkway. On 22 May, we watched a male feeding on buds of the silverbell (*Halesia carolina*).
- Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*)—Only at Mingus Mill (2,500 feet), GSMNP, Swain County, 22 May.
- Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*)—A single bird was seen and heard on two occasions on 25 May at 6,000 feet on Roan Mountain, Mitchell County.
- American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*)—Several flocks of as many as 50 birds of both sexes were seen along parts of the Parkway, often at elevations of 5,000 feet or more.
- Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*)—Two birds were seen and heard on two occasions at 5,800 feet on Roan Mountain, Mitchell County, on 25 May.

Rufous-sided Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*)—Seen and heard at several locations along the Parkway, but not above 5,000 feet.

Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*)—This species and the American Robin were easily the most abundant birds along the Parkway. We found a nest with four eggs on a road-side bank beneath trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*) near Parkway Mile 462 (4,500 feet), Swain County, 22 May. On a walk from Craggy Gardens to the Beetree Gap Picnic Area and back via the Parkway, Buncombe County, we estimated 40 to 50 of this species were seen or heard on 23 May.

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*)—One heard only near Parkway Mile 455, Jackson County, 21 May.

Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*)—Two birds heard only at Balsam Gap (3,370 feet) on the Parkway, Jackson County, 22 May.

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)—Two birds heard at Waterrock Knob (6,000 feet), Jackson County, 21 May.

We were interested to note the great abundance of American Robins, both the breeding birds at the middle elevations and the flocks of migrants at the higher elevations. It also struck us as unusual that once we were above 4,000 feet, we did not see any Icteridae—neither a blackbird, meadowlark, oriole, grackle, nor cowbird. Simpson (1972) notes only the Eastern Meadowlark among the Icteridae from Mt. Mitchell. Also, unrecorded and worthy of note were ducks and geese. Broad-winged Hawk, falcons, Ruffed Grouse, Bobwhite, Mourning Dove, caprimulgids (nightjars), Common Crow, waxwings, and shrikes. The early dates of our visit might account for some of these omissions.

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