

# General Field Notes

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## Breeding Evidence of the Mourning Warbler in the Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina

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In 1983, G. Schmalz and others discovered a pair of Mourning Warblers (*Oporornis philadelphia*) at 1356 m beside Jenkins Ridge Overlook at Blue Ridge Parkway milepost 460.8 about 15 km N of the Oconaluftee Visitors Center, Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The locality is in the Great Smoky Mountains but outside the park boundary on the Swain and Jackson county line in North Carolina. Habitat at the locality is a 0.61-2.44 m high thicket composed of deciduous shrubs and saplings and extensive herbaceous growth, especially of blackberries (*Rubus* spp.), on a steep slope. Chestnut-sided Warblers (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) were numerous in the area.

The pair of Mourning Warblers was first discovered on territory on 16 June. The singing male responded vigorously to playbacks of its own song and to tapes of other Mourning Warbler songs. The female was difficult to observe. In 1983, neither bird was seen bringing food to young at a nest, though observations continued until early July.

In 1984, a pair of Mourning Warblers was seen at the 1983 locality from 4 June through 23 July by Schmalz, the Siebenhellers, and others. Playback of

the Mourning Warbler song confirmed the pair was on territory. The male sang, unprompted by playbacks of the song, through at least 7 July. On 5 July at 0930 h, the Siebenhellers watched the male carry a green caterpillar in its bill to the top of blackberry growth before descending to or near the ground. It then reappeared 5 m away from where it landed, without the caterpillar. On unspecified dates in 1984, B. Duyck and R. Warner also saw similar male feeding behavior. The Siebenhellers also saw the female briefly, without food, but she was very secretive. The Siebenhellers are convinced the pair was feeding young at the nest but were unable to locate it despite an arduous search. Two days later, H. E. LeGrand, Jr., noted that the male became very agitated when he walked near the warbler's presumed nest site. No observers remarked that they saw distraction displays by either parent.

In 1985, the Siebenhellers found a male Mourning Warbler singing constantly on territory on 6 and 14 June at the locality of previous sightings. The male was apparently unmated and was not present on either 23 or 30 June, despite a thorough search.

On 22 May 1986, the Siebenhellers again found a male Mourning Warbler at the same locality. The male responded weakly to a playback of Mourning Warbler song. The bird was not relocated a week later.

In summary, a pair of Mourning Warblers was on territory in suitable habitat in June and July of 1983 and 1984, and the male, observed by several individuals, carried food to a presumptive nest site during the latter year. Presumably, the pair was breeding, but no nest or young were found. The nest of a Mourning Warbler is very difficult to find, and even observing adults feeding newly fledged young is difficult (D. B. McNair, pers. obs.). In addition, a male Mourning Warbler was briefly on territory in 1985 and 1986.

Habitat at the Jenkins Ridge Overlook was cut back in 1988, thus keeping the thicket low and suitable for possible reoccupation by Mourning Warblers. Despite the continued availability of suitable habitat at Jenkins Ridge Overlook and many other high elevation localities in the southern Appalachian Mountains south of Virginia and West Virginia, no breeding pairs of Mourning Warblers have been reported on territory during the nesting season south of these two states (Hall, 1983; Kain, 1987). Late spring migrants may be seen in the southern Appalachian Mountains through the second week of June. Thus, the pair of Mourning Warblers which presumably nested at Jenkins Ridge Overlook, North Carolina, is an extralimital breeding record.

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