

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

Breeding Evidence for the Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*) in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina: Reports of Fledglings and Eggs

Marcus B. Simpson, Jr.

P. O. Box 337, Advance, NC 27006

Breeding Season Distribution in North America

The Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*) nests predominantly in boreal forests of Canada and adjacent north-central and northeast portions of the United States. The breeding range extends southward in the eastern states through the Appalachian highlands to the mountains of West Virginia and Virginia. In Tennessee and North Carolina, the birds have been documented during the nesting season at Long Hope Valley, Roan Mountain, Grandfather Mountain, the Black Mountains, Unaka Mountains, Great Balsam Mountains, Pisgah Ridge, and Great Craggy Mountains (Lynch and LeGrand 1989; Simpson 1992; Potter et al. 2006). Preferred nesting habitat is dense, young growth of spruce (*Picea* spp.), fir (*Abies* spp.), or hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*). This note briefly reviews data that support nesting of the species in North Carolina.

Records by John Cairns

Apparently the earliest evidence suggesting that Magnolia Warblers nested in the southern Blue Ridge was reported by John Cairns from his observations in the Great Craggy Mountains of Buncombe County, North Carolina during the 1880s and 1890s. Cairns (1891) commented that “I think this bird must breed, as young are common in July”. Cairns was renowned for his ability to locate nests in the dense vegetation of the high mountains, and Pearson et al. (1919) conveyed an 1899 report that Cairns had collected a nest with eggs and that these had been sent to his friend, Samuel Bragg Ladd of West Chester, PA. Most of Ladd’s large egg collection was sold to Joseph Parker Norris of Philadelphia. Most of the Norris collection was

subsequently acquired by Nelson Hoy and in turn by the Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology (Lloyd Kiff pers. comm.).

To date, I have been unable to discover the whereabouts or fate of the Cairns nest and eggs. Careful investigation has failed to locate the specimens at the Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology (Lloyd Kiff pers. comm.), Museum of Comparative Zoology, US National Museum, Field Museum, Academy of Natural Sciences, American Museum of Natural History, NC State Museum of Natural Sciences, and the Reading Museum. Specimens attributed to Cairns are known to be present at other museums, however, so the reported set may yet be found.

Because of common errors in cataloging, filing, storage, and retrieval of egg sets, particularly those from the 1800s, it may be that the Cairns eggs are extant but not yet recognized or discovered. The elusive nature of collections from the Cairns era is further compounded by the widespread practice of selling and exchanging eggs and nests during the 1800s, such that specimens may be labeled with the name and home locality of the individual who acquired the material, rather than revealing the identity and location of the original collector. The eggs might also have been sold or exchanged to another collector, or perhaps lost or destroyed. The report by Pearson et al. (1919) might later have been found to be invalid, due to an error in identification or attribution.

Recent Breeding Season Records in the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains

Over the past 25 years, Magnolia Warblers have been reported during the breeding season in June and July from at least eight locales in the southern Blue Ridge Mountain province. The species has been a regular summer resident in suitable habitat in the higher elevations at the Mt. Rogers/Whitetop area of southern Virginia (Phil Shelton, pers. comm.; F. R. Scott, pers. comm.; Simpson 1976, 1992). Along the North Carolina border with Tennessee, the species has been noted at Roan Mountain fairly consistently for some years (Knight 2008 and pers. comm.; Simpson, 1992). Farther southwest on the Tennessee side of the state line, adults have been observed carrying food at Unaka Mountain on occasions dating to the mid-1980s (Simpson, present study; Lewis 2000; Knight 2008). More recently, the first proof of breeding at the Unakas included a report by Allan Trently of fledglings being fed by adults on 27 June 2000 (Lewis 2000), and by Kevin Elam on 8 July 2003 (Knight 2008). Away from the state line, two singing males were noted in June 1988 in Long Hope Valley in Watauga County (Lynch and LeGrand 1989). The species has been present during June and July on a number of occasions since at least the mid-1980s at Grandfather Mountain and nearby Beacon Heights (Simpson 1992 and present study). In the Black Mountains of North Carolina, the occurrence of singing males has been less frequent and more erratic than elsewhere in the southern Blue Ridge (M. J. Westphal, pers. comm.; Simpson 1992 and present study). Much farther to the south, the species was reported on 28–29 June 1997 at the Mount Pisgah campground along Pisgah Ridge (Davis,

1998) and in late June 2002 at Black Balsam Knob in southern Haywood County (Davis, 2002), also in this range.

Present Report

More recent evidence that Magnolia Warblers nest in North Carolina includes the presence of two adults feeding two fledglings at Grandfather Mountain on 25 June 2008. From 9:10 AM to 9:20 AM I observed the birds at close range in a fire cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*) at the margin of a dense thicket of Catawba rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), and blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.), admixed with maples (*Acer* spp.), red spruce (*Picea rubens*), and Fraser magnolia (*Magnolia fraseri*). The site is along a ridge on the south rim of the headwaters of Boone Fork at an elevation of 4620 feet. The birds eventually became alarmed at my presence and retreated into the heath thicket.

I have previously noted adult males singing in this area in June and early July on numerous visits between 1985 and 2008. On several occasions in other years I have observed adults carrying food in this area, but the impenetrable vegetation and rugged terrain preclude searching off trail for a nest or young. I have also noted adult males singing as if on territory during June and early July from 1985 to 2009 in suitable habitat elsewhere on the south side of Grandfather Mountain, at locations ranging in elevation from 4420 feet to 5600 feet.

Summary

To date, the best evidence for breeding by Magnolia Warblers in the southern Blue Ridge includes adult birds feeding fledglings at Unaka Mountain in Tennessee (Lewis 2000; Knight 2008) and at Grandfather Mountain, North Carolina (present study). The eggs and nest reportedly collected by Cairns in the 1890s has not been discovered or verified independently from the second hand account published by Pearson et al. (1919). Observers should continue to report evidence for nesting by this species in the region.

Literature Cited

- Cairns, J. S. 1891. List of the birds of Buncombe County, North Carolina. Privately printed.
- Davis, R. 1998. Briefs for the files. *Chat* 62:41–47.
- Davis, R. 2002. Briefs for the files. *Chat* 66:149–155.
- Knight, R. L. 2008. *The Birds of Northeast Tennessee*. Second edition. Bristol Bird Club, Bristol, TN.
- Lewis, R. P. 2000. The season: Eastern mountain region. *Migrant*, 71:122–123.
- Lynd, J. M., and H. E. LeGrand, Jr. 1989. Breeding season birds of Long Hope Valley, Watauga and Ashe Counties, N.C. *Chat* 53:29–35.

- Pearson, T. G., C. S. Brimley, and H. H. Brimley. 1919. Birds of North Carolina. North Carolina Geological and Economic Survey, Raleigh.
- Potter, E. F., J. F. Parnell, R. P. Teulings, and R. Davis. 2006. Birds of the Carolinas (second edition). University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Simpson, M. B., Jr. 1980. The letters of John S. Cairns to William Brewster, 1887–1895. *North Carolina Historical Review* 55:306-338.
- Simpson, M. B., Jr. 1976. Breeding season records of the Magnolia Warbler in Grayson County, Virginia. *Raven*, 47:56.
- Simpson, M. B., Jr. 1992. Birds of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Fifty Years Ago in *The Chat*—September 1959

General Field Notes in the September 1959 issue included reports of a number of significant records. E. Milby Burnham collected an immature Eared Grebe at Charleston on 14 Jan 1959, the first state record for South Carolina. Peter Manigault observed a White-tailed Tropicbird 18 nautical miles SSE of Charleston on 29 May 1959, the third state record. Robert Soots, James Parnell, and John Funderburg observed a Ward's Great Blue Heron on 23 Jan 1959 in a shallow farm pond near Lake Wheeler, southwest of Raleigh. It was thought to be the first state record of this subspecies. John Hatcher reported a Mallard nest in Aiken County, SC that was apparently the first documented nesting in the state. Ernest Cutts reported that American Coots had appeared in the newly constructed 100-acre duck pond at Magnolia Gardens, and young were observed, but despite extensive searching an actual nest could not be found. At the time there was not yet a confirmed nest record in the state. H. A. Hesperheide, F. C. Richardson, W. F. Rountrey, and Paul Sykes observed a Ruff on 21 March 1959 by the Knotts Island Causeway in Currituck Co., NC. This was the second state record, the first having been one collected in Raleigh on 6 May 1892 by H. H. Brimley. Bill Joyner reported seeing a pair of Sooty Terns on 10 June 1959 on an island near Cape Lookout. They were behaving as if they were nesting, but he was unable to determine which, if any, nest belonged to them. The pair was still present on another visit on 4 July. Robert Soots reported observing a Gray Kingbird in Umstead State Park near Raleigh on 16 Apr 1959. It was observed at length that day, among a large wave of migrants, but the next day it and all of the other migrants were gone. A Bewick's Wren was banded in Hillsborough, NC on 23 Sept 1958. A male Bachman's Warbler returned 22 Apr 1959 to the spot where it was found the previous year, across the Ashley River from Charleston. It remained until at least 16 May and was "watched by scores". —Kent Fiala