

Notes

Notes on Calls of Breeding Connecticut Warblers

by
Don Shanahan

During the first week of June, 1991, numerous Connecticut Warblers (*Oporornis agilis*) were heard singing in a tamarack fen west of Moosonee (Doug McRae, pers. comm.). These observations were made by volunteer bird identifiers walking two transect survey lines, each one kilometre long, as part of the M.N.R.'s Habitat Based Wildlife Assessment of the Hudson Bay Lowlands, co-ordinated by biologist, Nancy Wilson.

On 22 and 23 July, four sweeps of the aforementioned tamarack fen by two groups including bird identifiers, Bob Curry and myself, yielded one, and possibly two, very short Connecticut Warbler song bursts.

On the morning of 24 July, Curry heard an unfamiliar call while entering a mixed tamarack - black spruce (*Larix laricina* - *Picea mariana*) wetland. Following the call into very thick cover, Curry also encountered calling White-throated Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*). These birds seemed extremely anxious. While tracking the original call, Curry had a very short look at a perched Connecticut Warbler carrying food. In the next minute or two, the warbler was seen briefly in flight. Curry later

characterized the call as sounding like "poyt".

Curry and I returned to the same area early that afternoon, and despite following a faint version of the "poyt" call, did not see a Connecticut Warbler. Proceeding into an area adjacent to the tamarack fen, we encountered a group of adult and young White-throated and Lincoln's Sparrows (*Melospiza lincolni*) as well as Palm Warblers (*Dendroica palmarum*). Spishing seemed to agitate these birds and calling continuously the group quickly moved off into the fen. I followed and about 90 metres from our original observation point began to hear a repetitious, loud, liquid "poyt" call. Continuing a short distance, I spotted an insect larva-bearing Connecticut Warbler perched about 3 metres up on a lateral branch of a small tamarack. Mindful of the wary nature of this bird, I observed it quickly and determined that it was a male. The bird called continuously and remained immobile on its perch. After ten minutes, I hailed Curry who joined me near where the bird still called.

Suspecting that the bird had a nest with young in the immediate vicinity, we began a systematic ground search of the area's many moss and lichen filled hummocks.

After a further ten minutes of calling the bird disappeared and did not reappear or call again. An additional 35 minutes search failed to turn up a nest containing young or fledged young. Just as we stopped looking, Curry found a small grass-lined nest built into the top of a hummock some 4 to 5 metres away from the Connecticut Warbler's tamarack perch. It was impossible to accurately determine the age of the nest or the species that had used it.

Leaving the area with the Connecticut Warbler's call fresh in our minds, Curry and I reaffirmed the "poyt" (or in some instances "poitch") representation. The next morning while working the same tamarack - black spruce fen that had yielded Curry the initial Connecticut Warbler call, I again heard the now familiar "poyt". Unable to leave the transect midline, I did not pursue this bird.

Field guides and texts offer limited information on the calls of the Connecticut Warbler. Various correspondents in Bent (1953) describe fall migration calls as, "peek", or "witch" or "plink". Similarly, A.E. Allin, in Griscom and Sprunt (1957), describes the call note

as "a distinctive sharp metallic peenk or plink". The cassette series, *Songs of Warblers of North America* by Donald J. Borror and William W.H. Gunn gives no call for Connecticut Warbler. In summary, there are no references to the distinctive softer "poyt" call heard near Moosonee.

Considering the circumstances surrounding our hearing of this call, Curry and I have concluded that it is either a general distress call or, more likely, an alarm call made by parents with young nearby. Readers who find themselves in Connecticut Warbler habitat at this time of year may be able to track down the species by listening for this peculiar call note.

Acknowledgements

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Literature cited

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New Breeding Record for Great Gray Owl: Most Southerly in Canada

by
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On 6 August 1989, an adult Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) was observed by Graham Forbes and Jenny Theberge near Round Island Lake in central Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario (45° 43' N, 78° 14' W). This, the second summer record of a Great Gray Owl in the park, prompted Michael Runtz and other staff naturalists from the Algonquin Park Museum to search the area the following morning at sunrise. One adult and three fledged young were soon located, enticed into view by the sounds of "squeaking" (squeals resembling the cries of an injured animal, produced by noisily sucking on the backs of fingers).

The three fledgling Great Gray Owls were near adult size. They exhibited distinctly browner plumage than the adult (particularly on the upper back and neck), incomplete facial discs, undeveloped white "moustache" marks on the bottom of the face, less bulky heads than the adult, and some down still present on the flanks and the back of the head. The central retrices were pointed at the tips. The young frequently emitted raspy food begging cries. On 7 August, an adult was observed feeding a vole, possibly *Microtus pennsylvanicus*, to one young. At least one, possibly two adults and the three young were present again on 8 August, and two immature Great Gray Owls were located at the site on 16 August. Although the family group was found repeatedly in the same

area, a nest could not be located. This was not surprising since the young probably would have been off the nest for close to two months (Nero 1980). However, the nest may have been in the near vicinity, for Great Gray Owls have been known to remain within one eighth of a mile from a nest for at least seven weeks after leaving it (Nero 1980).

The birds were most frequently observed in a mixed second-growth forest, with Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), Yellow Birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*) and Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) dominant on the higher ground, and Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*), Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) and Speckled Alder (*Alnus rugosa*) bordering the creek and bog system that flowed through the lower area. One adult repeatedly flew into a beaver meadow on this creek system, and was seen leaving this opening carrying food (small voles) in its beak on at least two occasions, as noted by Ron Tozer *et al.*

Great Gray Owls typically breed in boreal forest habitat comprised of dense coniferous or mixed deciduous-coniferous forest, and spruce-tamarack (*Larix laricina*) bogs (Godfrey 1986). While only three nests are known from Ontario (Peck and James 1983), family groups, like this Algonquin one, were reported several times during the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Project (Prevett 1987). All of these records however, occurred much farther north than

Algonquin Park. Prior to this successful nesting in Algonquin, the most southern Canadian breeding record lay in Chisholm Township, Nipissing District (Baillie and Harrington 1936). (Chisholm Township is located northwest of Algonquin Park, east of Powassan, Ontario.) Although Algonquin Park lies in the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Forest Region, the elevations of "the Algonquin Dome" on which the Park is situated create conditions favourable for vegetation typical of the boreal regions (Strickland 1990). Thus the nesting of Great Gray Owls in Algonquin Park merely reflects this northern aspect of the Park, which also supports southern populations of Spruce Grouse (*Dendragapus canadensis*), Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), and Boreal Chickadee (*Parus hudsonicus*) -- birds representative of the boreal forest.

Of interest, on 5 September 1988, Graham Forbes observed a presumed adult Great Gray Owl in a bog less

than two km from the site of the 1989 birds. This fuels speculation that breeding may have possibly occurred in previous years.

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