



Figure 1: Grace's Warbler, 4 May 2016 at Point Pelee National Park.

Photo: Willie D'Anna

Grace's Warbler at Point Pelee: New to Ontario and Canada

Willie D'Anna

The Discovery

It was 4 May 2016, and I was nearing the end of a one-week visit to Point Pelee National Park. As had become my daily ritual, I was on one of the first trams out to the tip. I normally used that time to check my camera settings, relax, and continue to rouse myself from a night of sleep. However, this morning I was pleased to ride with Kevin McLaughlin and engage in conversation for the duration of the short trip. Upon arrival, Kevin darted off, on a mission to check an area

with great keenness. I headed slowly to the west path, then turned south toward the tip. I noticed Kevin, who was using a spotting scope to look for birds on the lake. Hoping for a good warbler day after so many disappointing ones, I continued on. It was not a promising start, however, as there were few songbirds to be found. A minute or two after passing Kevin, I saw what I thought would be my first warbler of the day, or possibly a Yellow-throated Vireo (*Vireo flavifrons*), as

the morning sun illuminated an obvious yellow throat, seen easily even without binoculars. The bird was in a small red cedar, right next to the lake, and the sun was behind me. Quickly finding the bird in binoculars, my immediate thought was, “Is this a Grace’s Warbler?” Like many long-time birders, I know almost all of the expected species of birds, especially warblers, quite well, and when I get a good view of one, as I had in this instance, identification can be very quick. But Grace’s Warbler (*Setophaga graciae*) was not an expected species and knowing that, I quickly told myself that I had to be overlooking something, that it had to be something else, that it had to be something more “expected”.

But as I watched the bird, nothing else was coming to mind, and I soon realized that I had better get photos. I pulled the camera up from my side, found the bird in the viewfinder, and pressed the shutter halfway. Nothing happened! The camera was still off! Nervously, I now looked away from the bird and turned the camera on. Looking back at the tree, I was relieved to see the warbler still moving through the branches. I was not about to bother with the camera settings. I needed to get a shot first. I only took a couple of photos, or so I thought, before the bird flew out of the tree and went south, down and across the trail to another red cedar about 25 m away. As the bird was in flight I noticed a couple of birders down the path and I commanded to them in a loud voice while pointing, “Get on that bird!” One of them did but the bird buried itself in the cedar and was not visible. I ran up to them but just as I got there, we saw the bird fly out of the tree and toward the

southeast, right at treetop height. I watched it for as long as I could but it did not appear to land in any nearby trees.

Settling on the Identification

One of the birders asked me what I thought it was and I replied with more of a question than a definitive statement, “I think it was a Grace’s Warbler?” In spite of the attempt to downplay the possibility with my questioning tone, I regretted saying the words almost as soon as they left my lips. But it was true, I did think it was a Grace’s Warbler, even though I had only seen one or two in my life, in Arizona, and that was over 25 years earlier. It is strange how memory works. Lately, I have not considered mine to be all that reliable but for some reason, what a Grace’s Warbler should look like, was firmly planted in my head. After another minute or so of stunned confusion, I remembered my photos. I didn’t know how many I had taken — only two or three, I thought. I hit the review button on my camera and up popped a blurry shot of the back of the bird, tail on, with the head down and not visible. I cringed and went to the next photo. Oh no — this shot showed only the back half of the bird in profile, with the head completely out of the frame! With mind-numbing trepidation, I went to the next image on my camera, praying that I would have another shot of the bird and that it would be a good one. Then, in front of my eyes on the monitor, there suddenly appeared a perfect three-quarter profile shot of the bird! I was relieved, to say the least. While I still was not positive that it was a Grace’s Warbler, at least now I would be able to figure out the identification (Figure 1).

Not knowing what to do next, I sent a text to my friend, Jean Iron, “Just photographed what I think is a Grace’s Warbler where the boardwalk path to tip meets the west side path.” I wanted to send her the photo but still being in panic mode, I wasn’t thinking straight and could not remember how to do it. Soon, Terry Whit-tam and Kevin caught up to me. Of course, I told them what happened and showed them my photos, hoping for a confirmation, but they could not identify the bird either. However, Terry did know how to send a photo to Jean by taking a picture of the camera monitor with my cell phone and then texting it to her. It was right after that, that it finally occurred to me that I had a bird guide app on my phone! Immediately, I looked up Grace’s Warbler and the three of us compared my one good photo on the camera with the photos on the app. Kevin went over the field marks one at a time and as he did so, I was finally becoming confident that it had to be a Grace’s Warbler. It was now time to get the word out, which I did with the assistance of Mike Tate, who sent a note to the Ontario email list service, Ontbirds.

Other Sightings of the Bird

Feeling that I had completed most of my responsibilities as the finder of a great rarity, I was now hopeful that someone would relocate the Grace’s Warbler, allowing many people to enjoy it. I continued to the point, where Ken Burrell, Tim Lucas, Barb Charlton and a few others were watching the migrants over the tip. When I told them of my bird and showed them the photo, they were stunned at first. However, they soon indicated that they

must have seen the same bird flying south off the tip just a few minutes earlier. Not knowing what it was at the time, they assumed that it was likely a Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*) and Tim grabbed a photograph. I was unable to tell much from the photo on the small camera monitor but the time stamp was 07:00. Looking at the time stamp on my camera indicated that I saw the bird at 06:54, just six minutes prior. It seemed plausible because when I lost the warbler it was headed in the direction of the tip, which was only 250 m from where I saw the bird.

While I birded for a lot longer in the tip area, the Grace’s Warbler was the only warbler that I saw there on that day! Later, in the afternoon, there was a post on Ontbirds from Joseph Minor. He had photographed a bird at Sparrow Field at 07:16. Although he had no idea what species it was when he photographed it, after uploading and studying his photos, he now wondered if it could have been the Grace’s Warbler that had been reported to Ontbirds earlier. While Joe’s photos were soft, everyone agreed that they appeared to show a Grace’s Warbler. This means that six minutes after I saw the bird, it was presumably photographed flying south off of the tip, and then 16 minutes after that, it was photographed about 0.8 km further north at Sparrow Field, indicating that it had turned around, opting not to fly over the lake at that point in time. Unfortunately, shortly after Joe’s Ontbirds post, it started to rain pretty hard for a few hours. This likely prevented many people from venturing back out to the tip area to look for it. Joseph Minor’s was the third and final report of this bird. All three sightings took place within just a 22-minute span.

Description and Identification

Throughout my brief observation of the Grace's Warbler, it was alone, so I had no direct comparisons with other birds. The description that follows is derived mainly from my photographs of the bird. This is a small warbler, closer in size to that of a Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*) than a Yellow-throated Warbler (*Setophaga dominica*). Likewise, the bill is also small and thin, more like that of a Nashville than the long bill of a Yellow-throated Warbler. The head pattern is striking with a bright yellow throat and a bright yellow supercilium that extends from the bill to a short distance past the eye. Behind the eye, the supercilium is white. There is a conspicuous arc below the eye, which is yellow on the anterior portion, becoming whitish on the posterior portion. The lores are dark gray, almost blackish. The auriculars, crown, back, rump and uppertail coverts are gray, lacking a brown wash that some immatures show. Below the yellow throat, the ventral body is whitish to and including the undertail coverts, with blackish streaking along the flanks. The outer pair of tail feathers, visible on the closed tail from below, are mostly white with grayish along the edges.

With its yellow throat, white ventral body and gray upperparts, Yellow-throated Warbler is the most similar species but a good view of the head pattern easily eliminates it. Yellow-throated Warbler shows extensive black on the auriculars, a mostly white supercilium and a white patch behind the black auriculars, all features that are lacking on Grace's Warbler.

Ageing and sexing this warbler is not that easy. It was clearly not an adult male, which would show blacker lores and more black on the crown. Bird bander, Shai Mitra, of Long Island, N.Y., offered his insights:

"I would say without any doubt that this is a second-year bird (second calendar-year, first spring, fledged in 2015, etc.) based on the worn condition and tapered tips to the rectrices, and based on the brown color of the primaries and primary coverts, in contrast with the replaced secondary coverts."

"I am less confident about the sex. The presence of black in the lateral crown and the generally clean gray and bright yellow appearance suggest a male, but I would have thought the flank streaking would be heavier and more distinct. I don't know the tail pattern of this species well enough to judge for sure, but the relatively large amount of white on the outermost rectrix would suggest a male in second-year individuals of other species with similar tail patterns."

Range and Extralimital Occurrence of Grace's Warbler

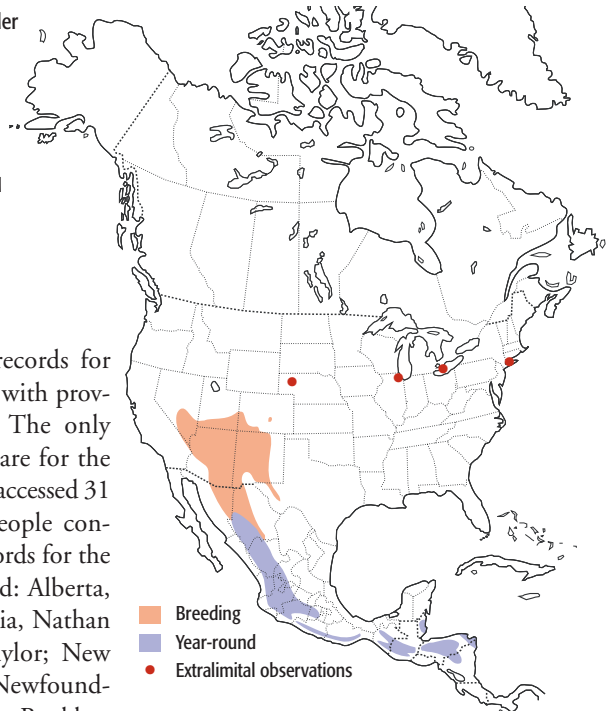
The Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) accepted all of the reports at the three discrete locations in the tip area where the Grace's Warbler was reported on 4 May 2016 (Burrell *et al.* 2016). Although not everyone was convinced that Tim Lucas's photographs at the tip showed a Grace's Warbler, many people were, including myself, and most importantly, so was the OBRC. The Point Pelee individual represents only the third record of the species east of the Mississippi River, the first record for Ontario and the first record for Canada.

Figure 2: Range map of Grace's Warbler and four extralimital observations mentioned in the account:

Point Pelee
Long Island, New York
Chicago, Illinois
western Nebraska (Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge)

To confirm the lack of records for Canada, I checked eBird and with provincial and regional experts. The only records in eBird for Canada are for the Point Pelee individual (eBird, accessed 31 Jan 2018). The following people confirmed that there were no records for the province or territory indicated: Alberta, Peter Taylor; British Columbia, Nathan Hentze; Manitoba, Peter Taylor; New Brunswick, David Christie; Newfoundland and Labrador, Alvan Buckley; Northwest Territories, Cameron Eckert; Nova Scotia, Ian McLaren; Nunavut, Cameron Eckert; Prince Edward Island, David Seeler; Quebec, Pierre Bannon; Saskatchewan, Stuart Houston; and Yukon, Cameron Eckert.

The first record east of the Mississippi River was found by John Purcell and Clara Coen on 8 September 2003 at the famous Montrose migrant trap in Chicago (Purcell 2004) and was accepted by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (Stotz and Johnson 2004) (Figure 2). The second record was from Long Island, New York. It was discovered during the Southern Nassau County Christmas Bird Count by Doug Gochfeld and Andrew Baksh on 1 January 2012 and was last seen on 4 January (Gochfeld



2012). The record was accepted by the New York State Avian Records Committee (Wilson *et al.* 2014). The next closest record to Ontario is Nebraska's only record, which was found at Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge in western Nebraska on 4 May 2008 (eBird, accessed 31 January 2018), exactly eight years before the first Canadian record at Point Pelee described here.

Grace's Warbler is at the northern reaches of its breeding range in the southwestern United States, which extends southward through Mexico and Central America to Nicaragua. Breeding has been confirmed in montane forests of southern Colorado, Utah, Nevada and Texas, and more widely in Arizona and New Mexico (Dunn and Garrett 1997) (Figure 2).

Other than these six states, in addition to New York, Illinois and Nebraska as already noted, Grace's Warbler has only been found in California (Dunn and Garrett 1997). As can be seen, Grace's Warbler has not shown a tendency to wander far very often in North America. Obviously, it is fortuitous for this warbler to show up at Point Pelee at all but to have it photographed at three different locations in the park, within the short span of only 22 minutes, is truly remarkable.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to all of the provincial and regional experts who so quickly responded to confirm the lack of records of Grace's Warbler in their respective areas. In this regard, Alix d'Entremont and Peter Taylor were particularly helpful in seeking out the right people to ask. Shai Mitra was most gracious in studying my photographs and offering his opinion on the age and sex of the warbler. I am grateful to Ken Burrell, Tim Lucas and Joe Minor for submitting documentation to the OBRC for this record. Tim and Joe also emailed their photographs to me so that I could study them on my computer monitor. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology gave permission for use of the range map from the Birds of North America series (<https://birdsna.org>).

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Willie D'Anna
4777 E. Lake Road,
Burt, NY 14028
E-mail: herringgull@roadrunner.com