

Orchard Oriole: New to Northern Ontario

by
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On 25 September 1986 the authors located an immature Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) at Terrace Bay, Thunder Bay District, while observing birds in the company of Mark W. Jennings. The bird was found at the town's sewage pond, which is located just south of town at the base of a steep embankment; further to the south the Lake Superior shoreline is less than 1 km away. This very shallow sewage pond is surrounded by mostly deciduous forest, with extensive patches of various weeds (mostly *Bidens* sp.) in and around the water.

The Orchard Oriole was first seen by Lamond, who saw it flying twice over the pond. On the first encounter it was suspected of being a tanager (*Piranga* sp.), but after the second observation was considered more likely to be an Orchard Oriole. Some time later we relocated the bird and were able to keep it under almost continuous observation for about 20 minutes. With binoculars, at distances ranging from 10 to 20 m, the bird was studied feeding on the ground in tall dead grass, in patches of dead fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*), in mountain ash (*Sorbus* sp.), in white birch (*Betula papyrifera*) and

in some still-green elderberry (*Sambucus pubens*) bushes. We had no difficulty in identifying this exciting find as an Orchard Oriole, since the species was previously very familiar to all three of us.

This sighting represents the first record of Orchard Oriole in northern Ontario, the species having not been listed for the region by Wormington and James (1984), or subsequently by the Ontario Bird Records Committee in their annual reports (1983 to 1985 inclusive).

Description

The following is a synopsis of the description we were able to obtain: in size the bird was small for an oriole, being hardly larger than a large sparrow (e.g., White-crowned Sparrow, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*), but with a more slender build. In flight the bird flew in a somewhat jerky style with its long, well-rounded tail held down.

At a distance or in flight the bird simply appeared entirely olive-green in colour, but was noticeably lighter below. The head, back, rump and tail were mostly a uniform shade of olive-green, except that the head was slightly darker on the crown and forehead, the back showed very slight grey

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"marbling", and the rump (contrasting with the tail and back) was slightly lighter. No markings (e.g., tail-spotting) were present in the tail. The wings were slightly darker and greyer than the back, with two distinct but dull, dirty white wingbars; the smaller fore wingbar (median wing coverts) was thicker and probably slightly yellowish. The entire underparts of the bird were lighter than the upperparts. The lower portions were light greenish-yellow, while the throat was a distinct, clear lemon yellow with some duskiness at the edges. The eye was black or dark; there was an indistinct dark eyeline extending from the bill base to a point just behind the eye. The bill was moderately thick-based but tapered to a sharp point; it was either straight or perhaps very slightly down-curved. In colour it was mostly dark-dusky with some pale colouring at the base.

The only vocalization made by the bird (heard once by Lamond) was a double-noted, blackbird-like chatter, recognized as typical of the species.

We considered the bird to be an immature (young-of-the-year), mainly due to the bright underparts, and in particular the bright yellow throat. Oberholser (1974:814) describes this feature as a distinction between immatures and the similar adult female at this time of year.

Status and Range of the Species

In eastern North America the Orchard Oriole regularly breeds north to Massachusetts, extreme southern Ontario, southern

Michigan, central Wisconsin and southern Minnesota, and westward to include extreme southern Manitoba and southeast Saskatchewan (A.O.U. 1983:734).

Records north and east of the above range in the vicinity of the Great Lakes pertain almost exclusively to birds in spring or early summer, unlike the fall occurrence at Terrace Bay. The most extralimital of these include the following: five spring and early summer records north to the Ottawa area (Bruce M. Di Labio, pers. comm., 1986); nine spring records for Manitoulin District (Nicholson 1981:177-178); several spring appearances at Whitefish Point, Michigan (Payne 1983:58); and an adult male observed by Marjorie Carr *et al.* on 21 May 1979 at Stony Point, Lake Superior, the only northern Minnesota record away from the Red River Valley along the west edge of the state (Kim R. Eckert, pers. comm., 1986). More distant occurrences in the east include numerous records for Nova Scotia and a single record for Newfoundland (Godfrey 1986:557).

Also unusual about the Terrace Bay bird is that it occurred on a very late date for the species. Only one later record is known for Ontario, that being an adult male observed 18-20 November 1962 at Oakville, Halton Regional Municipality, by Barry D. Jones (pers. comm., 1986) and others. This remarkable record was apparently unknown to James *et al.* (1976:48), who list the latest Ontario date as 21 September, a record which presumably refers to the Orchard Oriole seen on that

date in 1952 at Point Pelee, Essex County, by Robert E. Mara (O'Reilly *et al.* 1953:48).

In summary, the present record represents an unusually late fall record of the species well north of its breeding range, presumably the result of disoriented reverse migration. Despite this uniqueness, however, the record fits a developing pattern in northern Ontario—and Lake Superior in particular—where southern species have most often been recorded during fall migration, and often on dates considerably later than their normal migration periods.

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Editor's Note: Up until now, the Annual Report of the Ontario Bird Records Committee has always appeared in the first number of each volume of *Ontario Birds* (April issue). However, due to the fact that the OBRC holds its annual meeting in March, it is impossible to include the committee's report without delaying the publication of the journal. Commencing this year, therefore, the OBRC Annual Report will regularly appear in the second (August) issue of *Ontario Birds*. This will not only allow us to better maintain our production schedule, but will also provide ample time for the OBRC to review records and compile them into a first-class report.

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