

A. TOWNSEND'S WARBLER IN MASSACHUSETTS

A RETROSPECTIVE SIGHTING

by Craig Jackson, Cambridge

It is with some degree of embarrassment that I set down the following account to be recorded in the ornithological history of Massachusetts. However, it is my hope that by so doing, future "Townsend's" may be correctly identified.

My birding companion, Soheil Zende, and I have always wondered what would happen if we were the ones to come upon a real rarity. Well, now we know--we'd blow it! About 7:15 a.m. on May 4, 1978, Soheil Zende, Martha Reinstein, and I started down the south side of the tower in Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts; halfway down the hill I spotted a black-throated warbler feeding in a Norway Maple. Although the bird seemed somewhat unfamiliar, I assumed it was a Black-throated Green Warbler, not having seen a BTG for a year, and called out the bird to Soheil and Martha. The three of us stopped to look at the bird, which was very striking, a perfectly-plumaged male. The bird had a dark greenish head with a bright yellow triangle around its eye (similar to a Blackburnian Warbler) and dark cheek patch. Its back was a grayish green and it had a black throat. I asked Soheil for confirmation, since I did not remember the face pattern and the color of the back seemed strange, and he assented.

We both then began to relate to Martha what a beautiful bird the Black-throated Green Warbler was and how this one was a particularly fine specimen! We further noted how the face pattern was particularly distinctive, even though both Soheil and I had nagging doubts in our minds about this bird. Never having had a good look at a Black-throated Green Warbler before, Martha was very pleased although she did protest that the bird wasn't "green." Not wanting to appear unsure of ourselves, we both insisted that it must be a quirky plumage since most BTG's were green; and neither one of us stopped to check either Peterson or Robbins, both of which we had. Since I had to be at work within the hour, I quickly scanned other birds in the area and started down the hill toward Willow Pond to see a Louisiana Waterthrush.

Meanwhile, since the "BTG" was a life bird for Martha, she studied it quite closely and noticed that it had a yellow breast underneath the black throat in addition to the distinctive face pattern. After having observed it for a while she looked up the bird in the Robbins Field Guide to note what the identifying characteristics were so she would recognize "BTG's" the next time she saw them. When she turned to the page and looked at the picture of the warbler she was observing, she was amazed to find the name next to the picture was "Townsend's Warbler," not "Black-throated Green Warbler," whose picture was below it!

The bird was photographed by Simon A. Perkins, thus establishing this first confirmed sighting in Massachusetts. There is one other record published in Bailey from Naushon Island, November 26, 1927 (Ralph E. Forbes). There is also an unpublished report of a Townsend's Warbler banded on Nantucket, but the details are lacking; supposedly the bird was

photographed, but those photographs were never released.

Surprisingly a number of records from the East have been recently published in American Birds. In the spring of 1978, a bird was banded on Great Gull Island, New York, a week after the Mount Auburn sighting (fide P. A. Buckley). This record was the eighth report for the New York City area, of which all but two have occurred in the spring. Other reports include:

- 1977: 4/15 Hempstead Lake State Park, Long Island, New York
1975: 4/24 Nantahala Village, North Carolina (William Roe)
1974: 11/17 Tyler Arboretum near Media, Pennsylvania (S. J. Ross)
1973: 6/9,10 Sable Island, Nova Scotia, photographed; a first record for Atlantic Canada (Jean Boulva, D. W. Finch, Angus MacLean)
1972: 12/23/71-1/72 a feeder in Princeton, New Jersey, (Thomas Poole + v.o.)

I've learned my lesson. In the future, I will not hesitate to use my field guides when I discover a species I haven't seen for some time, or when I'm doubtful about a bird.

Fortunately, thanks to Martha, I was subsequently able to observe the Townsend's Warbler (as a Townsend's Warbler) both that morning and afternoon. I would like to finish this article by quoting my field notes concerning the bird. (Any comments concerning these notes would be appreciated.)

"Both times I sighted the bird it was feeding in Norway Maples. Its feeding behavior was generally quite deliberate although the bird did flit its wings and hover like a kinglet quite often while feeding. Physical features--yellow on the breast; below the black throat was a pale lemon color as opposed to the yellow triangle on its head, which was a brighter yellow with almost a touch of orange to it--top of head almost seemed to be a dark cap--triangular head pattern and dark cheek patch already noted--top of back was a dark green turning to a grayish-green toward the tail--white belly below the yellow breast and also white along sides--distinct streaks were seen on the sides but the streaks did not appear to occur in the yellow breast area but rather were in the white on the sides--didn't notice if bird had wing-bars! Size--bird seemed to be about 2/3-3/4 the size of a nearby Yellow-rumped Warbler--bird never sang or made any vocalization during entire time I observed it." 5/4/78