

**FIRST WINTER RECORD OF SWAINSON'S WARBLER
(*Limnothlypis swainsonii*) FOR FLORIDA AND THE UNITED STATES**

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Swainson's Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*, hereafter SWWA) is one of the most secretive bird species in the Nearctic and one of the least known. After its original description by Audubon in 1834 it took more than 50 years until the species was again mentioned in the scientific literature (Brewster 1885), and it took a further 85 years until more of its life history became known (Meanley 1971). Since then, several studies shed light on the life history traits and habitat preferences of the SWWA (summarized in Anich et al. 2010). However, knowledge of SWWA's ecology and conservation status in its migratory and wintering habitats is still scarce (but see Graves 1996).

Its breeding range is rather patchily distributed across the southeastern United States, ranging from rhododendron thickets in the Appalachian Mountains to the bottomland hardwood forests which form its main breeding habitat. This habitat has undergone strong fragmentation due to habitat loss (Gosselink and Lee 1989). Consequently, of the five characteristic bird species for this type of habitat (Askins 2002), three have already gone extinct or are possibly extinct, namely Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) and Bachman's Warbler (*Vermivora bachmanii*). In addition, a further specialist of this habitat is the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) which is not yet threatened, despite its population is decreasing (Butcher & Niven 2007). Because of its habitat specialization and with an estimated global population size of just 84,000 individuals (Rich et al. 2004), the SWWA is of high conservation concern. The wintering range of the SWWA is located in the Greater Antilles and the Yucatán peninsula, as well as adjacent areas in Belize and Honduras (Ridgely et al. 2007). In this note, I provide the first documented winter record of a Swainson's Warbler in Florida, and the United States.

On 15 January 2013 a small passerine was discovered in the understory of a hardwood hammock along the Golden Orb Hiking Trail of Long Key State Park, Long Key, Monroe County, Florida. The bird was hidden but unperturbed by the observer while foraging in the litter layer ('leaf-lifting'). It was slightly smaller than an Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) but bulky bodied and without any strong plumage pattern, except a rather obvious pale supercilium that contrasted with a darker eye stripe. The bill was long and like a spike. The rufous crown slightly contrasted with the brownish body. The underparts of the bird were much paler than the upperparts, with flanks a pale grayish brown and the throat and breast a pale washed-out grayish yellow. The flanks and breast were unstreaked. The feathers were brighter towards the vent and the undertail coverts. The silent bird was observed for a few minutes until it disappeared in the thickets of the hammock.

As initial conditions prevented me from taking photographs, an extensive search for the bird was conducted the next day (16 January). After almost four hours of searching in the location, the bird was rediscovered ca. 50 m away in similar dense vegetation. A tape playback was not used and the bird remained silent. Again, it was followed for several minutes until a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) snatched some prey from

the bird, which, apparently in consequence, left the site. However, documentary photos were taken showing the bird's distinctive characters while foraging (Fig. 1). Due to the dense vegetation (Fig. 2), the unfavorable light conditions, and the continual movement of the bird, I could not take a photograph showing the entire bird.

Despite its unobtrusive plumage, the SWWA is a rather distinctive Nearctic species. Its rather plain plumage patterns are reminiscent of the plumages of some Old World warblers of the genera *Acrocephalus* or *Phylloscopus* but are unique in North American passerines. However, Old World warblers typically do not forage in the litter layer and have several other distinctive features such as different body size, tail length, and bill shape. Other ground-living parulids like Ovenbird or waterthrushes (genus *Seturus* and *Parkesia*) have a much more striking plumage pattern with heavily streaked breasts and flanks. Wrens (family Troglodytidae) differ by having barred wings or tail feathers and undertail coverts. SWWA shows no obvious barring. All these considerations support identification of the bird I saw on 15 January as SWWA.

Because the southernmost part of Florida including the Florida Keys is often seen as transitional between the Nearctic and the Caribbean zones in general and birds in particular, it has been presumed that the SWWA might be a possible candidate for wintering in the continental U.S. (David Simpson and Robin Diaz, pers. comm.). The first evidence of a wintering bird in Florida (Lake Jessup area) dates back to 'winter of 1869' and a further record originates from Key Largo from 6 December 1971 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Both records are considered vague because the first lacks a definite date and the second is during the migration period for many southbound species (Andrew W. Kratter, pers. comm.). Two further records obtained during Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) from 22 December 1964 (Lower Keys CBC) and 15 December 1973 (New Port Richey CBC) are 'not accepted' by Stevenson and Anderson (1994). However, a bird banded at

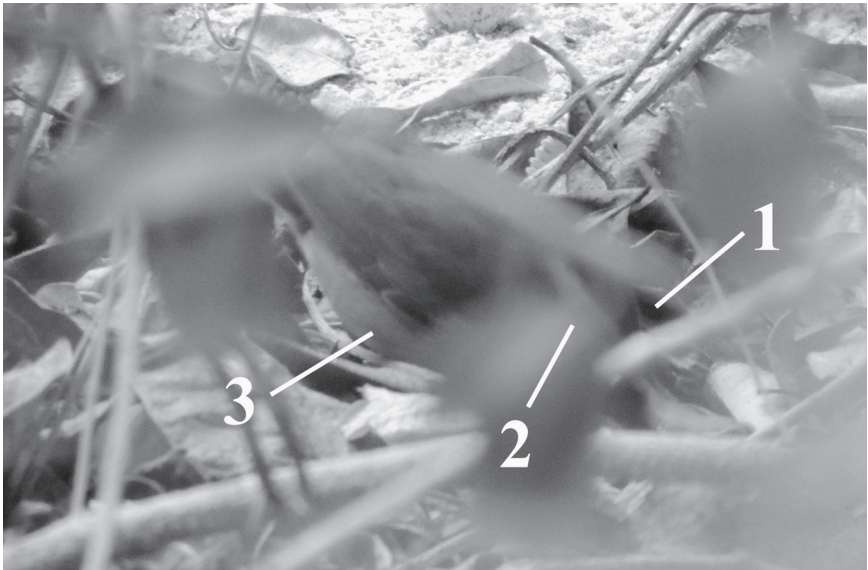


Figure 1. Picture of the foraging Swainson's Warbler in the litter layer of the hardwood hammock located at the Golden Orb trail of the Long Key State Park, Layton, FL. Distinctive features are highlighted: 1) rufous crown, 2) light supercilium, 3) unstriped flanks.



Figure 2. The dense vegetation of the hardwood hammock where the Swainson's Warbler was found. A) Respective habitat along the Golden Orb trail.

the Cape Florida Banding Station in 2006 most likely wintered in this area, although a final confirmation was not achieved (Robin Diaz, pers. comm.). This bird was banded on 29 September 2006 and thereafter recaptured six times until 3 November 2006, and then again on 12 March 2007. According to Robin Diaz (per. comm.), each time the bird was recaptured, its fat score was at the lower end but its muscle score at the higher end of the scale, indicating a healthy individual which was not in a migration mode (i.e. with high fat score), but its whereabouts between November and March remain unproven. However according to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), its last capture in fall was within the migratory period of the SWWA, whereas its first recapture in spring was just three days before the earliest recorded arriving day of SWWA in Florida (15 March). From this, a record in mid January would be the best evidence for a wintering bird in Florida.

For the past two decades, Pranty et al. (2008, and references therein) listed and documented verifiable first wintering records for Florida of seven bird species which normally winter in the Caribbean or in the Neotropics. Most of these observations might be rare events, however, they show that Florida is a rather exceptional place in the temperate Nearctic. Although we cannot document that the birds persist through the entire winter, their survival until January or February indicates that some may have endured the winter months in Florida. The winter season 2012/13 was exceptionally warm and dry, though (e.g., NOAA 2013). Thus, the outstanding warm conditions might have prompted some species to stay farther north than in normally cold winters (cf. La Sorte and Thompson 2007).

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