

AN EXCEPTIONALLY LATE FALL MIGRANT PHENOMENON IN DOWNTOWN ATLANTA, GEORGIA — Between late October and early December 2009, there appeared a variety of neotropical migrants in a small park in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. This event was unusual not only for the diversity and number of species involved, but also for the exceptionally late time of year during which it took place.

“Migrant trap” is a phrase that conjures up the names of famous barrier islands, capes, and tiny greenspaces surrounded by skyscrapers. The latter was the setting of an event that unfolded in downtown Atlanta. Beginning in late October, Nathan Farnau began monitoring the limited habitat in Centennial Olympic Park (COP): young maples (*Acer* sp.), oaks (*Quercus* sp.), common crapemyrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*), holly (*Ilex* sp.), fountains, and open lawns. Central Park, New York City, this is not; the full extent of the habitat can easily be examined in less than an hour (Fig. 1).

What first appeared to be an isolated anomaly of a few late wood warblers soon revealed a diverse array of species in the park (Table 1). Some species proved to be one-day wonders: a Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) seen on 3 November; a Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) on 4 November; a Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) on 7 November; and a Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*) on the extremely late date of 1 December. Other species remained for weeks in varying abundance: 3 Ovenbirds (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) on 6 November; 5 Common Yellowthroats (*Geothypis trichas*) and 5 Tennessee Warblers (*Oreothypis peregrina*) on 29 November; and 3 each of Black-and-white (*Mniotilta varia*) and Hooded Warblers (*Wilsonia citrina*) on several dates. The late November and early December records exemplify a curious phenomenon: one after another, species began to establish exceedingly late “fall” departure dates for Georgia. Such new records included: Ovenbird, 29 November; Black-throated Green Warbler and Hooded Warbler, 1 December; Nashville Warbler (*Oreothypis ruficapilla*) and Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*), 6 December; and American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), 8 December. Some observations were especially remarkable: on 4 November an American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) wobbled around under bushes between a picnicking family and a busy street, while on 14 November a slumbering Eastern Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) perched just meters above the heads of hundreds of passersby.

As if COP itself is not small enough (8.5 ha), it quickly became apparent that nearly all of these migrants were concentrating in one specific section of the park (Fig. 1). Directly adjacent to Centennial Olympic Park Drive on the

northeast side of the park, the landscaping creates a network of tight groves of young maple trees with an understory of dense hollies and other shrubs, interspersed with walking paths and small plazas or thematic “quilts,” each of which features a sculpture. Just to the west, a series of fountains, pools, and artificial boulders creates a cascade of water separating the maple groves from a thin line of young cedars, crapemyrtles, and other sparse decorative trees and shrubs (Fig. 1). Birders began to refer to specific areas in which individual birds could be relied upon to show up fairly consistently: “Just downhill from the Quilt of Dreams terrace... best look ever at a male Wilson’s Warbler in Georgia” read the Georgia Rare Bird Report (<http://gos.org/rbas/ga2009/2009-11.html#2009-11-09>) on 8 November 2009. This observation was not atypical, and the quiet patience of many birders was rewarded with close-up views of foraging warblers, while passersby and security personnel often stopped to ask why so many people with binoculars and cameras were descending on the park.

Throughout the fall migrant phenomenon at COP, speculation thrived among the birding community as people searched for possible explanations. The phenomenon of “reverse migration” has been proposed by some (Edward S. Brinkley, pers. comm.). After a certain date, can these birds really be considered “migrants” at all? Did light pollution draw the birds into the city only to become disoriented and exhausted? Did an absence of food leave these birds without adequate energy reserves to continue their journey? And perhaps the biggest question of all, is this a new phenomenon, or does something similar occur at COP during every migration? One thing is certain, Georgia birders will be checking in to search COP during fall 2010.

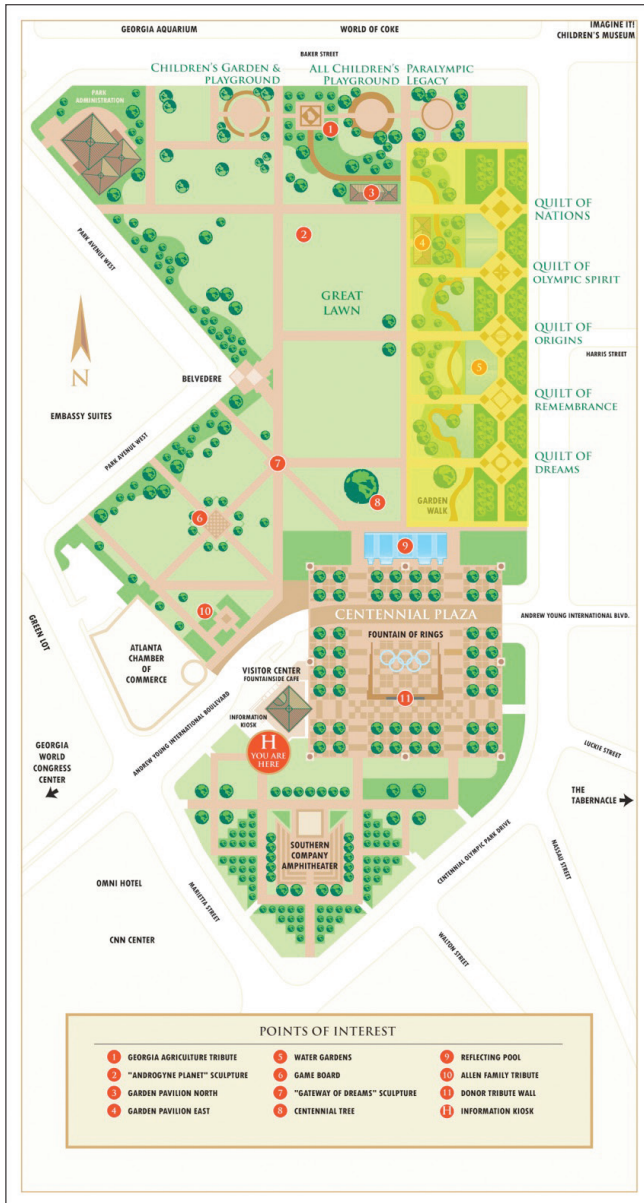


Figure 1. Map of Centennial Olympic Park, Atlanta, Georgia (courtesy of <http://www.centennialpark.com>). Area of maximum migrant activity highlighted in yellow.

Table 1. Migrants documented at Centennial Olympic Park, Atlanta, Georgia, from 23 October to 12 December 2009. Dates of single-occurrence high counts are annotated parenthetically.

Species	Common Name	First Observation	Last Observation	High Count
<i>Scolopax minor</i>	American Woodcock	4 November	4 November	1
<i>Caprimulgus vociferus</i>	Eastern Whip-poor-will	14 November	15 November	1
<i>Contopus virens</i>	Eastern Wood-Pewee	3 November	3 November	1
<i>Vireo solitarius</i>	Blue-headed Vireo	4 November	14 November	1
<i>Catharus guttatus</i>	Hermit Thrush	23 October	8 November	4 (11 Nov)
<i>Hylocichla mustelina</i>	Wood Thrush	7 November	7 November	1
<i>Oreothlypis peregrina</i>	Tennessee Warbler	1 November	4 December	5 (29 Nov)
<i>Oreothlypis celata</i>	Orange-crowned Warbler	8 November	20 November	1
<i>Oreothlypis ruficapilla</i>	Nashville Warbler	24 November	6 December	1
<i>Dendroica pensylvanica</i>	Chestnut-sided Warbler	3 November	3 November	1
<i>Dendroica magnolia</i>	Magnolia Warbler	1 November	29 November	1
<i>Dendroica caerulescens</i>	Black-throated Blue Warbler	7 November	14 November	1
<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	Yellow-rumped Warbler	19 November	19 November	2
<i>Dendroica virens</i>	Black-throated Green Warbler	1 December	1 December	1
<i>Dendroica pinus</i>	Pine Warbler	12 November	16 November	1
<i>Dendroica palmarum</i>	Palm Warbler	23 October	18 November	3 (9 Nov)
<i>Dendroica castanea</i>	Bay-breasted Warbler	7 November	25 November	1
<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	Black-and-white Warbler	29 October	1 December	3
<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	American Redstart	23 October	8 December	2
<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	Ovenbird	22 October	29 November	3 (6 Nov)
<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	Common Yellowthroat	22 October	4 December	4 (29 Nov)
<i>Wilsonia citrina</i>	Hooded Warbler	23 October	1 December	3
<i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>	Wilson's Warbler	6 November	14 November	2
<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	Savannah Sparrow	4 November	4 November	1
<i>Milospiza georgiana</i>	Swamp Sparrow	1 November	7 November	3
<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	Dark-eyed Junco	28 October	20 November	2
<i>Piranga rubra</i>	Summer Tanager	23 October	6 December	1
<i>Pheucticus ludovicianus</i>	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	29 October	7 November	1

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