

GENERAL NOTES

VIRGINIA'S WARBLER WINTERS IN VALDOSTA, LOWNDES COUNTY, GEORGIA – I have been in the habit of maintaining a nectar feeder throughout the winter months for a number of years. On 27 December 2009, a first-year male Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) appeared at the feeder and remained all winter. This proved to be fortunate because it provided extra incentive to regularly check the feeder each day. On 15 January 2010, I observed a very active warbler-sized bird on the feeder consuming nectar for a short time. Without binoculars, I could not pick up any field marks.

The nectar feeder was located at the edge of a large bed of red shrimp plant (*Justicia brandegeana*) less than 1 m from a living room window. On 16 January, I was watching the feeder at first light waiting for the hummingbird to arrive. But the first bird at the feeder was the warbler. During the short time the warbler was at the feeder, I noticed that it had a complete white eye ring and a uniform shade of undetermined color on the head, back, and wings. The undertail coverts were a very bright yellow and the rump was more of a yellow-green. In addition, the bird was constantly bobbing its tail up and down with some lateral motion. I did not see the bird at the feeder the rest of the day. Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*) seemed a possible identification, but I was still not sure about the color of the head, back, and wings. The shade seemed too light for black or dark green. I contacted Jim Flynn and related what I had seen so far. He was very interested in the possibilities and made plans to visit the next day.

On 17 January, my wife Kate monitored the feeder and captured a video clip of the warbler which Flynn viewed when he arrived. He noted that the head, back, and wings were uniform light gray and immediately identified the bird as a Virginia's Warbler (*Oreothlypis virginiae*), a species that we had only seen once before, in Arizona. The discovery of this extreme rarity quickly spread around the state. The next morning, 18 January, there were 15 experienced observers gathered in our living room just before sunrise hoping that the warbler would reappear, which it did just a few minutes after first light. It was noted that the warbler had just a small smudge of yellow on the breast consistent with a female. Paul Sykes was among the group and remarked that this must surely be the first time that a Virginia's Warbler and Ruby-throated Hummingbird were in view at the same time! Birder visitation continued throughout the bird's stay and hundreds of images were taken. Several of these were sent to Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett, and they concurred this bird was a young female, perhaps a first year bird (Giff Beaton, pers. comm.).

Virginia's Warbler is endemic to the western United States and winters in western Mexico south to Oaxaca. There are few records of the species in the eastern United States where the species is considered a vagrant (Dunn and Garrett 1997). There are two winter records for the eastern United States, 17 December 1988, Cameron, Louisiana, and 10-17 February, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (Giff Beaton, pers. comm.). Georgia's first record for Virginia's Warbler occurred when multiple observers saw a female at Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park, 17-19 September 1997 (Howard 1999). The record was accepted by the GOS Checklist and Records Committee and the species was placed on the Provisional Species List for Georgia (Beaton et al. 2003:119).

The Valdosta bird persevered into March 2010 in spite of several spells of cold weather, territorial aggression by a resident Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) and late in its stay, considerable harassment from migrating Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*). Acting on a tip from one observer, we placed a tray with watermelon (from Mexico!) in the shrimp plant patch. The warbler readily accepted this offering and began a pattern of shuttling to and from the feeder and the tray all day long. Interestingly, it never flew directly to a feeder. True to its rather secretive nature, it would fly into nearby vegetation and carefully work its way to the feeder. Habitat may have played a part in this warbler's wintering here. While most of our lot is typical of subdivisions in that it is devoid of natural vegetation, the rear (east) property line features a mixture of large hardwood trees such as oak (*Quercus* spp.) and common persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*). The understory of this wooded area is a dense mixture of various shrubs, vines, and herbaceous vegetation, much like the preferred habitat of this species in its native range (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

The female Virginia's Warbler was last seen on the morning of 24 March 2010, ending a remarkable 69-day stay. Coincidentally, this was also the last day I saw the hummingbird. The GOS Checklist and Records Committee accepted this first documented record for Virginia's Warbler in Georgia (GCRC 2010-14) and the species has been added to the Regular Species List for Georgia.



Virginia's Warbler, Lowndes Co., 2010, by Pierre Howard.

Literature Cited

- Beaton, G., P.W. Sykes, and J.W. Parrish, Jr. 2003. Annotated checklist of Georgia birds. Georgia Ornithological Society, Occasional Publ. No. 14.
- Dunn, J., and K. Garrett. 1997. A field guide to warblers of North America. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.
- Howard, P. 1999. Virginia's Warbler at Kennesaw Mountain, Cobb County, Georgia. Oriole 64:5-6.

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