

THE CAPE MAY WARBLER IN MAINE

BY JAMES BOND

THE status of the Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*) in Maine has always been obscure. Brewster stated that it bred abundantly about Lake Umbagog, on the New Hampshire border, from 1871 to 1875, after which it completely deserted this region (Minot's 'Land-birds and Game-birds of New England,' ed. 2, p. 103, footnote, 1895). Since this time, apart from some records from Mt. Desert Island and Bucksport (Hancock Co.) and Hog Island (Knox Co.), I have been unable to encounter anyone who has found this bird nesting in the State. Mr. Arthur H. Norton, of the Portland Museum of Natural History, informed me in May, 1936, that he was acquainted with the species on migration only, while Knight, author of that delightful book, 'The Birds of Maine,' stated that he had never seen this warbler in life. For my own part, although I have visited Maine almost every spring or summer for the last ten years, I never met with the Cape May Warbler until the present year (1936), when I found, to my delight and surprise, that it was a fairly common summer resident on Mt. Desert Island and also located the species during the nesting season on the mainland (Washington Co.). My observations on Mt. Desert Island were confined to the southern portion of the island where, in the limited area covered, as many as ten pairs were found. The birds appeared during the last week in May and in all instances the males were discovered singing at or near the top of tall spruces. At no time was a male seen to descend, when feeding, lower than twenty feet above the ground.

Throughout the period of observation, from May 28 until June 15, the males were almost constantly in song, although there was a notable falling off in song in the second week in June. The males had no particular 'singing tree' as many warblers have, but each bird confined itself to a very restricted locality, keeping within a radius of approximately a hundred yards. Most of the birds seen were in thick spruce growth, but one pair was located, near Ship Harbor, in more open, mixed growth with scattered clumps of spruce. I decided that these birds would be the easiest to study and, after two days of futile watching, was finally fortunate enough to find the female building near the top of a black spruce. This was on June 2. The female appeared at the nest with building material on an average of about once every ten minutes. Her flight to and from the nest was exceedingly rapid so that I had to keep my eyes glued to the spot in order not to miss her. That afternoon I located her about a hundred yards from the nest collecting the hair of a collie dog that had been buried by someone and later dug up by foxes. Here the female was remarkably tame, allowing me

to approach within a few feet, in marked contrast to her behavior near the nest. The following day (June 3) she was still building, though her visits to the nest were more infrequent. The male took no part in building as far as I could ascertain, but was usually singing not far away. When near the nest, his song was much weaker. I saw him but once accompany the female to the nesting tree, and even on this occasion he remained a few feet from the nest itself. At times, however, when the female was working on the nest, the male would fly with rigid wings just above her. This was a characteristic courting display, noted with other individuals. On June 8, the nest was examined and found to be completed but without eggs. On June 15, the tree was again climbed and on this occasion the nest contained six eggs. The female was not on the nest and I cannot say if the set was complete as the species is known on occasion to lay as many as eight eggs. About ten minutes after I reached the tree, the female appeared chipping excitedly but the male was nowhere in evidence. The nest, apparently the first to have been found in the United States, was situated thirty-eight feet above the ground against the trunk of a black spruce approximately four feet from the extreme top of the tree. It was remarkably well hidden and was completely invisible from below, even with the aid of a twelve-power binocular. It was a rather bulky cup, composed of plant stems and grasses and a little plant down and sphagnum moss, with a soft lining of feathers and dog's hair. The eggs are white, heavily marked, chiefly about the larger ends, with various shades of reddish brown, lavender-gray and black; they measure 16.3 x 12.6 mm.; 15.7 x 12.2; 16.2 x 12.0; 16.1 x 11.9; 16.0 x 12.2; and 16.2 x 12.8, respectively. In view of the fact that all nests of the Cape May Warbler that have been found in Quebec ('Auk,' vol. 34, pp. 410-413, 1917), northern New Brunswick ('Auk,' vol. 36, pp. 38-39, 1919), and Maine have been near the tops of tall spruces, it would be wise to regard the "classical" nest taken near St. John, New Brunswick, by Banks as that of a Magnolia Warbler, as is indicated not only by its situation but by its construction, for the nest of the Cape May Warbler is a decidedly more bulky affair. I mention this since recent books still perpetuate this undoubted error, ignoring the information that has been gleaned during the past twenty years.

As I never have seen a good rendering of the song of the Cape May Warbler, the following might prove useful to field observers in the future. In Maine this consists of a rather monotonous *tsect-tsect-tsect-tsect*, with a rising inflection to each note. It might also be described as resembling a repetition of the second note of the couplet of the common song of the Black and White Warbler, which to my ear resembles *we-sect, we-sect, we-sect, we-sect*; but the notes of the Cape May Warbler are more penetrating than are those of the Black and White Warbler.

I have never, even in the present year, seen the Cape May Warbler at

any distance inland in Maine, for the birds evidently favor the cool, coastal section within the limits of the Canadian Zone; and it may be mentioned that within a mile of Ship Harbor there were apparently nesting such northern species as the Acadian Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Tennessee Warbler, Yellow Palm Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler (several pairs), and Wilson's Warbler.

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