

THE NORTHERN ELEMENT IN THE SUMMER BIRD LIFE OF SOUTH-CENTRAL NEW ENGLAND

BY WENDELL TABER

FROM the White Mountains in New Hampshire a broad, high plateau extends southerly through that state, then across Massachusetts and Connecticut toward Long Island Sound. On a line extended southerly from Mt. Moosilauke (a peak of 4810 feet elevation some 31 miles southwest by west of Mt. Washington) 15 or more peaks in New Hampshire attain altitudes of between 2000 and 3300 feet. Other peaks lie to the east. On this same line in Massachusetts altitudes of 1200 to 1400 feet are numerous, and one peak to the east rises to over 2000 feet. Westerly of the line the plateau falls off sharply to the Connecticut River, which in northern Massachusetts has an elevation of 200 feet or less. On the line still farther, in Connecticut, altitudes of 900 to 1000 feet are frequent and two eminences near the town of Union reach almost 1300 feet. The formation changes, though, into one of high, flat, parallel ridges flanking broad river valleys, all taking a generally north and south direction and gradually losing altitude as they approach the coast.

On Mt. Washington, 6288 feet, the highest peak in northeastern North America, the tree-line is at about 5000 feet. Above this elevation the flora is arctic-alpine. In the Sandwich Range, 25 miles to the south, I have found breeding at about the 3000-foot level such birds as the Canada Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), Acadian Brown-capped Chickadee (*Parus hudsonicus littoralis*), Bicknell's Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Hylocichla m. minima*), and, once, the American Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoïdes tridactylus bacatus*). My observations of the last-named species there are quoted by Bent (1939: 120).

Farther south in New Hampshire the flora and summer avifauna of the plateau continue to conform to the altitude rather than the latitude in possessing a strong northerly tinge. Thus, near Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire (maximum altitude in the vicinity nearly 1900 feet), not far north of the towns of Royalston and Winchendon in Massachusetts, trees such as the balsam (*Abies balsamea*), red spruce (*Picea rubens*), and larch (*Larix laricina*) are common; hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) and paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*) occur in moderate-sized stands; and the ground hemlock or yew (*Taxus canadensis*) is local. Over a period of 14 years I have found the following birds nesting in the region at 1000 to 1300 feet elevations: Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*), Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Nuttallornis borealis*), Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), and Myrtle Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*). The White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) is common. Near Royalston, Massachusetts, I saw a pair of Slate-

colored Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) on June 17, 1938. Their behavior indicated that they were nesting.

John H. Conkey, a conservative field ornithologist who was Secretary of the Nuttall Ornithological Club prior to his removal to Ware, Massachusetts, in 1934, informs me (*in litt.*) that in the Ware and Quabbin Reservoir region of Massachusetts, which traverses about half of the state (roughly the half lying between the northern quarter and the southern quarter), the hemlock and paper birch are common, the red spruce uncommon, and the beech and yellow birch (*Betula lutea*) local. He informs me, too, that he considers the following to be characteristic summer birds: Alder Flycatcher, Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*), Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*), Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*), Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*), Blackburnian Warbler (*Dendroica fusca*), Northern Water-Thrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*), and Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*). My own scattered records over a period of years are corroboratory. Additionally, I recorded a Winter Wren near Winchendon in the aforesaid northerly quarter in a suitable breeding site, and a Myrtle Warbler and a White-throated Sparrow in the adjoining township of Ashburnham, all on June 7, 1947. Aaron M. Bagg informs me (*in litt.*) that he heard an Olive-sided Flycatcher in a spruce swamp near the Winchendon Township line on June 27, 1950. Data presented by E. H. Forbush (1927) clearly indicate that most or all of the above-mentioned birds are summer residents of this plateau region in Massachusetts.

In the course of numerous trips between Boston and Hartford, Allen H. Morgan and I became intrigued by the sparsely inhabited, densely forested highlands we crossed in the northeastern corner of Connecticut. Two exploratory trips made by Aaron M. Bagg to the region heightened our interest. After many delays we finally visited this area in early July, 1950. Bagg, unfortunately, was unable to join us. Arriving at Bigelow Hollow State Park, near the town of Union, on the evening of July 1, we camped there.

A notable feature of the Park is an extremely narrow, densely timbered, mile-long gorge, through which flows Bigelow Brook, the outlet stream from Mashapaug Pond, elevation 706 feet. Hemlock is dominant in this gorge. Descending at a moderate rate, the ravine debouches suddenly into a large, irregularly shaped pond, Bigelow Pond, elevation 636 feet, tucked in among 900-foot hills covered with hardwoods. The shores of the pond are badly fouled with a tangled mass of long-dead trees, many of them still standing. From the pond the brook continues its descent at a greatly decelerated rate, through the Yale Forest, meandering down a fairly narrow valley filled with alders. Hills covered with hardwoods rise to over 1000 feet at either side.

So much attention has been paid to the *southern* element in the bird life of south-central New England that ornithologists are all but unaware of the boreal element there. The part of northeastern Connecticut which I have briefly described just above, together with northwestern Connecticut, contiguous parts

of New York, and the New York-New Jersey-eastern Pennsylvania hills form a southward-projecting boreal 'finger' comparable to—though of course less pronounced and less southerly in extent than—that of the main Appalachian chain and that of the great Rocky Mountain system of the west. Merriam, in his "A Review of the Birds of Connecticut, with Remarks on their Habits" (1877: 1-2) and Sage and Bishop (1913: 8) mention, respectively, the 'Canadian Fauna' and 'Canadian elements in the avifauna' of Connecticut, but do not give much attention to them as such. The breeding status of several of the 'northern' birds of this area has not, to my way of thinking, been fully enough stressed anywhere.

This strong 'northerly tinge' of the bird life contrasts rather sharply with the 'Carolinian tinge' of the Connecticut River valley itself, an area which has been described by Bagg and Eliot (1937). The same may be said of the coastal plain region of northeastern Massachusetts, parts of which lie east of southern New Hampshire. This coastal area has been described in detail by Townsend (1905; 1920) and more briefly by Stubbs and Emilio (1931).

Worth repeating is the fact that one is never far from this southern element when doing field work in the plateau region. On July 1, in North Woodstock, Connecticut, some ten miles east of Bigelow Hollow State Park, Morgan and I saw a Turkey Vulture (*Calhartes aura*). We saw the same or another Turkey Vulture the following day near East Woodstock. Altitudes along the ridge tops in this area reach 700 to 900 feet. Aaron Bagg and Henry M. Parker, in their intensive study of the Turkey Vulture in Connecticut (MS) conclude that this 'southern' species has become a common migrant and summer resident in certain western and southern parts of the state, but believe that our Woodstock records are the first for the northeastern part of the state.

Of the 66 birds recorded (58 in Bigelow Hollow State Park proper) by Morgan and me on July 1 and 2, 1950, the following boreal species warrant comment. Unless otherwise stated, localities mentioned are within the Park.

Brown Creeper, *Certhia familiaris*. July 2, I watched a pair of these birds chasing each other around an islet in the pond below the gorge. E. Alexander Bergstrom, of West Hartford, informs Morgan (*in litt.*) of having seen the species on Talcott Mountain, outside West Hartford, on May 30 and June 6, 1943. Sage and Bishop (1913: 173) give no records for Connecticut between May 7 and September 19. Forbush (1929: 354) describes the species as "rare in summer in southeastern parts [of New England] and not yet reported as breeding in Rhode Island."

Hermit Thrush, *Hylocichla guttata*. At least three of these birds were singing the evening of July 1st, and the species was much in evidence the following day. Only one Wood Thrush, *Hylocichla mustelina*, was recorded in the immediate vicinity, although that species was exceedingly common elsewhere throughout the greater territory. Bagg recorded two Hermit Thrushes in a hemlock swamp in nearby Phoenixville on June 14, 1950. Bergstrom (*in litt.*) states that the species nests in some numbers in the yellow pine of the Farmington Valley west of Hartford and at times on Talcott Mountain. He adds that there are summer records for Mansfield Center and Tolland, towns not greatly distant from Bigelow Hollow State Park. Except for one Hartford County record, Sage and Bishop (1913: 178-179) restrict the

species in summer to the northwestern part of the state. Forbush (1929: 402) considers the species a "common summer resident throughout . . . northwestern Connecticut" but rare and local elsewhere in southern New England in summer.

Blue-headed Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*. We saw or heard this species at three places in the Park July 2. Sage and Bishop (1913: 146) consider it "very rare" in summer, but mention several breeding records for Eastford, less than 7 miles distant, air-line, from the Park. Forbush (1929: 191) considers the species a "rare local summer resident" in Connecticut.

Black-throated Blue Warbler, *Dendroica caerulescens*. We found this species twice within the Park on July 2 as well as at one place just outside on July 1. Bagg found "many" throughout the region in general on June 15, 1950. Sage and Bishop (1913: 154) mention breeding records for Eastford, but limit the summer distribution otherwise chiefly to western parts of the state, as does also Forbush (1929: 235).

Myrtle Warbler, *Dendroica coronata*. One of these birds was singing as we cooked supper on July 1, and we distinguished four territorial areas of the species the following day. By way of contrast, a Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*), rare in the days of Sage and Bishop but now well distributed even in Massachusetts, flew back and forth repeatedly not far from our fireplace. Sage and Bishop did not record the Myrtle Warbler in summer. Forbush (1929: 238) states that the species "summers and possibly breeds locally in the hills of northwestern Connecticut." J. A. Farley (1919) observed a female and found a nest just over the state line near Webster, Massachusetts, on May 17, 1919.

Blackburnian Warbler, *Dendroica fusca*. As might be expected in a large hemlock stand, this species proved to be almost common. (On June 14, 1950, Bagg had found it at four places in and near Phoenixville, Connecticut. The following day he had found it in numbers throughout the area in general.) Bergstrom informs me that there are June records for Tolland and Willington, towns which lie within the plateau region. Also, he has found the species on Talcott Mountain in summer. Sage and Bishop (1913: 157) limit the species' summer distribution to northwestern parts of Connecticut. Forbush (1929: 258) calls it a "rare summer resident, less rare in western parts."

Northern Water-Thrush, *Seiurus noveboracensis*. We heard this species singing the evening of July 1. On July 2 we heard two singing. Morgan succeeded in seeing both birds; I saw one. Bagg had seen one at the same spot on June 15. Sage and Bishop (1913: 160) give no records for the state between June 3 and August 3. Forbush (1929: 281), while stating that the species is not known to breed in Connecticut, comments that both this species and the Louisiana Water-Thrush (*Seiurus motacilla*) "are found in the same localities in western Massachusetts, across the entire state where their respective ranges overlap, and Mr. Harry S. Hathaway tells me that he has found both species breeding in the Kingston swamp in Rhode Island." At Bigelow Pond five Louisiana Water-Thrushes were in evidence. *Motacilla* and *noveboracensis* were practically together at times. The habitat was fairly typical of that in which I customarily find the Northern Water-Thrush in summer in northern New England, and both species were concentrated in a rather small strip of shore-line. No water was coming over the spillway out of Mashapaug Pond, and there was only a sluggish flow from underground seepage lower down in the outlet brook. Conceivably, drying up of the brook may have caused the Louisiana Water-Thrushes to vacate what, at times of good water conditions, would be their normal breeding territory. Also, they may have been occupying territory along another small but rapid stream flowing into the pond almost in the center of the jointly-shared shore. Both Forbush (1929: 284) and Peterson (1947: 205) point out, however, that the Louisiana Water-Thrush does, at times, inhabit wooded swamps. I have discovered this species three times recently in such swamps in eastern Massachusetts, a region where practically no streams maintain a head of swift water the summer through.

Canada Warbler, *Wilsonia canadensis*. We recorded this species at five places in the Park on July 2. With difficulty we succeeded in seeing two singing males. Bergstrom has recent

summer records for Hadlyme and Barkhamsted (brood in 1941), in the coastal area and western highlands respectively. Bagg found the species near Phoenixville on June 14, 1950. Sage and Bishop (1913: 165) state that it "breeds more or less regularly in the northwestern part of the state, although few nests have been taken." Forbush (1929: 308) calls it "an uncommon to rare local summer resident" in Connecticut. J. A. Farley (1919: 582) observed a pair building a nest a short distance over the state line, near Webster, Massachusetts, on May 23, 1919.

Rusty Blackbird, *Euphagus carolinus*. Bagg saw one of these birds at Bigelow Pond in the Park on June 14, 1950, but was unable to relocate the bird the next day. On July 2, within a few yards of the same pond, Morgan had a fleeting glimpse of what he felt sure was a Rusty Blackbird as it disappeared into a conifer under which I was standing. The bird uttered one short note which both of us attributed to this species. The pond and its outlet bear a strong resemblance to sites at which I customarily find the species in summer in Maine, but positive proof of nesting is lacking and the bird should be considered a straggler. I know of no occurrence of the species in summer nearer than Moosilauke. Sage and Bishop (1913: 114) give no dates for the entire state between May 13 and September 15.

White-throated Sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis*. From one spot, July 2, we could hear three of these birds singing. Forming an incongruous background was the insistent and monotonous song of a Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*). Sage and Bishop (1913: 129) limit the summer range of the White-throated Sparrow to the northwestern portion of the state. Forbush (1929: 73) states that the species breeds casually in the western highlands.

SUMMARY

The summer bird life of the hilly, sometimes mountainous, plateau which extends from the mountains of New Hampshire southerly across Massachusetts and Connecticut to the coast of Long Island Sound is definitely northern in its affinities. The maximum elevations of this plateau gradually decrease to the southward, but among the breeding birds of Bigelow Hollow State Park, in northeastern Connecticut, are the Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, Blue-headed Vireo, Myrtle Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Canada Warbler, Northern Water-Thrush and White-throated Sparrow. The Rusty Blackbird has been seen in summer. The Louisiana Water-Thrush, a southern species, breeds locally side by side with the Northern Water-Thrush, possibly as a result of drying up of the streams normally preferred. Most of the northern birds just mentioned have been known to inhabit northwestern Connecticut in summer, but their *breeding* in northeastern Connecticut has heretofore received little or no mention in the literature.

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