The Connecticut Warbler

*The Journal of The Connecticut Ornithological Association*

**July 2024**

**Deconstructing the enigmatic Bicknell's Thrush**
**The ups and downs of Connecticut's breeding birds**
**Staying in tune with a little night music**

# The Connecticut Warbler

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## ON THE COVER

### Bicknell's Thrush

Opportunities to photograph a Bicknell's Thrush in Connecticut are almost non-existent, so when a singing one was found at Larsen Sanctuary in Fairfield, Mary Walsh was ready.

## A Catharus Conundrum

*By Julian R. Hough*

*Bicknell's Thrush, Fairfield, 18 May 2024 (Mary Walsh)*
*Clearly a Gray-cheeked Thrush-type with cold-tones to the face and heavily spotted breast fading into grey flanks. Oft-quoted traits suggestive of Bicknell's shown by this bird are the combination of relatively short primary projection; bronzey wing panel at the base of the primaries; warm brown tones to the lower back and rump; and, an extensively pale (50%) yellow lower mandible; the latter easy to see in images but often hard to assess in the field.*

"It's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."- Winston Churchill

In Connecticut, one such species that might be defined as the epitome of that wartime quote is Bicknell's Thrush. A medium-sized Catharus thrush, it is one of North America's most restricted and rarest songbirds, inhabiting the high montane coniferous regions of the northeastern USA and extending into southern Canada. Outside of the breeding season, it is a stealth migrant, rarely detected on passage due to its close similarity to the more widespread Gray-cheeked Thrush.

Bicknell's closest breeding range to CT is in the Catskills, New York. After breeding, they migrate to spend the winter in the Greater Antilles. Although this species' eponym is on the precipice of being cancelled by the American Ornithological Society's decision to remove all honorific names (in prep.), it is currently named after American ornithologist Eugene Bicknell, who discovered this species on Slide Mountain in the Catskills in the 19th century.

Anyone looking at a range map would surmise, correctly, that this species, must migrate through CT with the throngs of other Catharus species. The conundrum

is that, despite slight morphological differences such as wing length and smaller size, they are essentially indistinguishable from Gray-cheeked Thrush. This field identification hurdle clouds the true status of this species in CT. On late fall nights there are whispers passed among birders apparently claiming to hear nocturnal flight calls of "that which must not be named' penetrating the still nights when nobody else is around to hear them. Window strike specimens from New Haven in the past couple of years have provided ongoing tangible evidence that this will-o-the-wisp migrant is hiding in plain sight, but birders, with only subjective field marks to use, continue to struggle, rightly so, to identify Bicknell's in the field.

Why are Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked separate species? Sometimes with species not easily recognizable on a phenotypic level, voice obviously plays a major part in birds recognizing one another, and those differences played a huge part in "splitting" these sister species at a taxonomic level. The songs of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's are similar, with the difference being the down-slurred notes at the end in Gray-cheeked, rather than a higher, up-slurred note in Bicknell's. Even the validity of the difference in their nocturnal flight calls has now been questioned (http://earbirding.com/blog/archives/4655), which adds to the complexity of understanding the true nature of this bird in the state. This identification roll back essentially removes another Jenga puzzle piece for some of our state's insomniac birders.

The best clue therefore is to detect a singing bird in spring. With annual records of migrants in song in the nearby borough parks in New York, this event should be anticipated in CT by birders hoping to add this to their state lists.

*Bicknell's Thrush, SY, Fairfield, Connecticut 18 May 2014 (Christopher Wisker)*
*Aged by the buff "wingbar." In the field, plumage tones and colors and extent of pale on the bill is hard to assess. Subtle brown hues and grays are often lost. However, in this image, there is a noticeable brown cast to the mantle and primary bases and again, here there is a noticeably warmer brown rump and tail. In this excellent shot, the relatively short primaries (compared to the tertial stack) is another pro-Bicknell's Thrush feature.*



This approach is exactly what yielded success for sharp Fairfield County birder James Purcell while birding Larsen Sanctuary on May 18, 2024. He recounts the following:

"I was just beginning my usual circuit of the trails at Larsen Sanctuary when I heard the soft song of a Gray-cheeked Thrush-type coming from the thick understory beside the trail. When I listened more closely, I heard the unmistakable upward inflection of the song at the end. From a previous experience of a singing bird at Lake Mohegan, I knew that it was likely a Bicknell's. After a few minutes the bird popped up at eye level just a few feet away, showing a plain, dark face and rather cold brown upperparts with a bit of warmer color on the wings and tail. I also noticed that the lower mandible of the bill seemed quite yellow. It continued to "whisper" sing and give its loud "wheer!" call from the undergrowth."

*Gray-cheeked Thrush, Bridgeport, Connecticut 11 May 2022 (Nick Bonomo)*
*On this back view, note the uniform, colder olive plumage lacking a warmer and paler primary panel and the long primary projection longer than the tertial stack. The pale, dull yellow mandible appears as extensive as in many Bicknell's, and in isolation, a feature I find of limited use in separating them*

*Bicknell's Thrush, SY, Fairfield, Connecticut 18 May 2024 (Mary Walsh)*
*On this front view, this looks like a Gray-cheeked Thrush with colder brownish-grey plumage, a narrow, incomplete pale area at the rear of the eye and yellowish-lower mandible. Note the breast pattern here and compare the darkness of the spots to Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes. On this one image, even allowing for the color and extent of the pale lower mandible, this would not be confidently identifiable in the field. Also any smaller size differences are not often apparent on lone birds.*

Despite being well-travelled, I had never been to the breeding grounds so Bicknell's Thrush was a world lifer for me. As we say across the pond, "You don't get many of those to the pound these days." So on hearing the news, along with fellow birder Jason Rieger, we burned rubber en route to Fairfield to hopefully check out what a "known" Bicknell's Thrush looked like.

For clarity, this is not in any way meant to be an overview of the field identification of Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, but more a 'boots-on-the ground' pictorial assessment of what subjective plumage

features may stand out when chancing upon a putative Bicknell's. The species is clearly is a "sum of its parts" and many non-calling birds will have to be left as "probable/possible." It brings into question what do we label birds presenting as "Gray-cheeked" Thrushes? Do we log them all as Bicknell's/Gray-cheeked? Since Gray-cheeked is a more abundant species in fall, most cold-looking birds are likely to be that species, but it does beg the question on other, "warm" birds, especially when you consider that Gray-cheeked Thrushes breeding in Newfoundland are allegedly warmer-toned than typical Gray-cheekeds and thus must appear intermediate in appearance. An enigma wrapped up in a mystery indeed.

To conclude, the field separation of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrush in Connecticut is unsafe at best - unless the bird is singing in spring. The chance to test out "typical," "sometimes" "possibly" features on an individual of known identity was a great opportunity, and this was probably the first multi-observed Bicknell's Thrush in the state. It is these individuals that give the focused birders the chance to form clearer benchmarks of plumage. We need to keep looking and learning and pushing boundaries, or sometimes, in the case of Bicknell's Thrush, redrawing them.

A retrospective kicker in this story is that last spring, while on a walk around my neighborhood in City Point, New Haven, a briefly seen thrush showed itself. It looked small and was Gray-cheeked-like from the front but showed a paler eye ring and a nice warm-toned Hermit thrush-like panel in the wings. As it melded with the darkenes and flit off I was left thinking it had to be a dull, interior race Hermit Thrush, but looking back now, I do wonder…

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to James Purcell for finding the bird and contributing some words. Thanks to photographers Mary Walsh, Nick Bonomo, Bill Rankin, Dave Mathieu, Christopher Wisker and Paul Fusco for kindly allowing me to use their images to illustrate this article.

*Julian R. Hough, jrhough1@snet.net*



*Bicknell's Thrush, SY, Fairfield, Connecticut 18 May 2024 (David Mathieu)*
*This shot shows how much light can play into photographs and affect plumage tones, showing very warm colored brownish upperparts and rump, pale eye-ring, strong wing panel and obvious yellow lower mandible that recalls Hermit Thrush.*

*Hermit Thrush, SY, Connecticut (Paul Fusco)*
*Aged by the buff "wingbar", more strongly uniformly brown above with a contrasting foxy-colored tail. To me, the smaller Hermit Thrush shouldn't be overlooked as a potential confusion species for Bicknell's. Hermit Thrushes typically are paler flanked, pinker-legged with a contrasting rufousy tail that is often cocked. Many have a pale lower mandible, and a nice complete eyering, but both Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's show a paler, diffuse area around the eye that is prominent and obvious in the field. Note here also the inverted heart-shaped spots that are quite blackish and extensive compared to both Gray-cheeked/Bicknell's.*

# Changes in Connecticut's Species Composition

*By Joseph Belanger*

## Introduction

Birders in Connecticut have watched with alarm as several species have become increasingly marginalized across the state, while also recognizing that other species have abruptly gone from rare to commonplace. Northern Bobwhite has disappeared from the landscape, with Ruffed Grouse and American Woodcock now facing similar extirpation. Wild Turkey appeared suddenly and expanded dramatically, only to plunge into its own decline. Bald Eagle and Common Raven are expanding across the state as American Kestrel becomes increasingly elusive. Barred Owl and Yellow-breasted Sapsucker numbers have grown steadily in recent decades. These are only a few of the birds undergoing such changes, and this discussion will examine the forces driving these events.

## The Ecosystem

The New England region comprises a forested ecosystem that is generally referred to as a transitional-mixed forest, with the exact terminology varying from author to author. Essentially this means that the region lies between the vast spruce-fir (boreal) forest to the north and the central hardwood forest to the south. Connecticut is strongly influenced by the central hardwood forest because of its south-facing position, and this is evidenced by the abundance of Tulip Tree, Sassafras, several oaks and various hickories. The northern hardwood forest straddles the Canadian border and is characterized by American Beech, Sugar Maple and Yellow Birch. The northern and central hardwoods meet in New Hampshire to form the transition hardwood forest, which features abundant White Birch, Red Maple, White Pine and Eastern Hemlock. This transition hardwood forest extends southward across

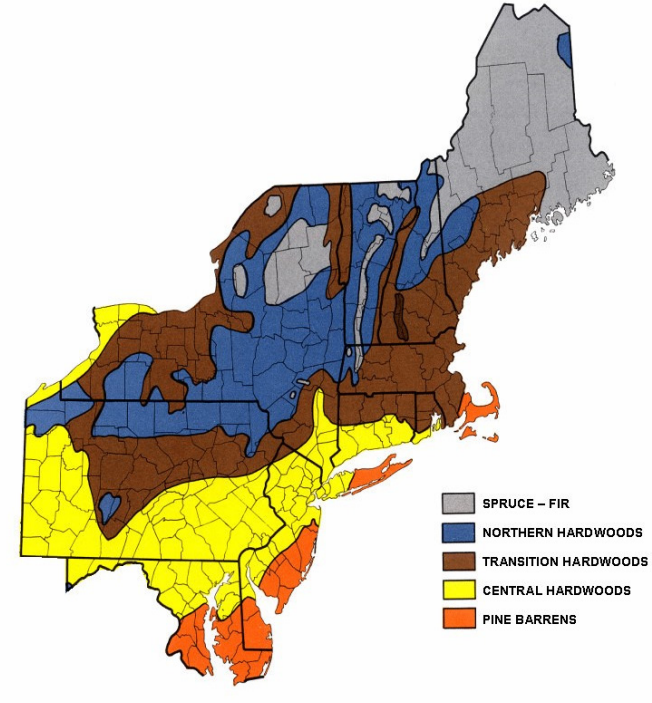
*Red-bellied Woodpecker and Black Vulture are two recent southern migrants into New England (J. Belanger).*





Massachusetts and into northern Connecticut, carrying with it the varied mosaic of northern tree species noted above.

Warming temperatures are currently driving the central hardwood forest steadily northward, and at current trends it will encompass all or most of Connecticut before the end of the century. Concurrently, the transition and northern hardwoods are gradually receding toward Canada, while the boreal forest faces elimination in New England (McKenney et al. 2007). This warming pattern is also reflected by those avian species that have been steadily marching northward for decades. Beginning in the 1950s New England was colonized by southern migrants that included the Tufted Titmouse, Northern Mockingbird and Northern Cardinal. This same migration pattern is more recently reflected by the Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren and Black Vulture. Conversely, several species are feared to be slipping away from New England as their breeding ranges slide deeper into Canada, and these include Evening Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin and Purple Finch. The Common Raven, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Barred Owl are atypical migrants that are moving southward, but they seem to be driven more by forest maturation than by climate considerations.




*Map of the northeastern United States showing five forest types. After Lull (1968); forest type names by Howard et al. 2005. Dark brown area in southwestern New Hampshire represents a blending of transition hardwoods and northern hardwoods at higher elevations.*

## Reforestation

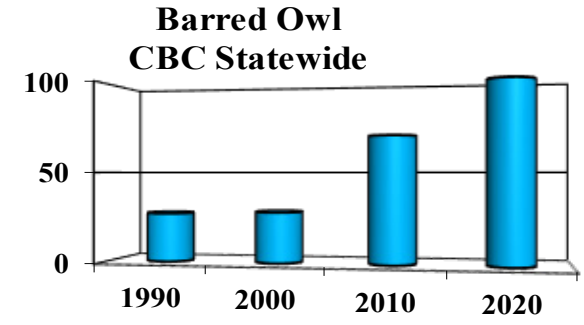
In 1900 approximately 50% of New England consisted of land that had been cleared for small farms and pastures. Over the next century most of these plots were abandoned in the face of western competition from larger and more fertile agricultural tracts (Bell 1989). This resulted in a widespread patchwork of scarcely used fields and brushy localities that provided ideal breeding habitat for many early successional species. But by 2000 most of these abandoned farmlands had grown into various stages of forest, sending the early successional species into a pronounced decline. Ruffed Grouse, American Woodcock and Northern Bobwhite are three examples of this group, which is sadly far more extensive.

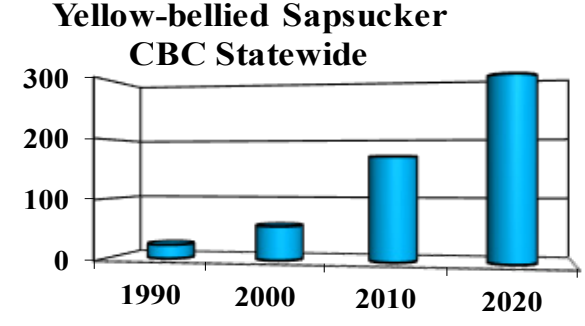
*The Barred Owl spread from its Litchfield County stronghold to establish itself across all of Connecticut. (Left photo by Logan Belanger, right photo by Marvin Turner)*

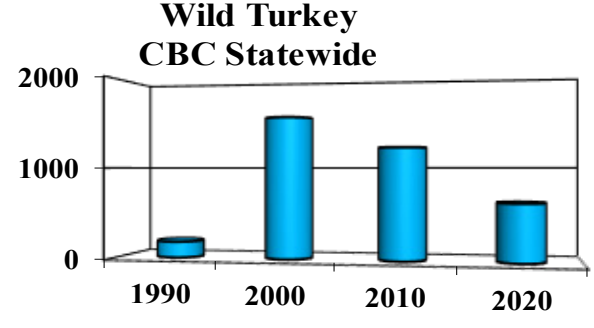
In direct contrast to this habitat reduction, the maturation of woodlands in Connecticut has driven the expansion of several forest species that had previously been rare in the state. The Barred Owl spread from its Litchfield County stronghold to move across Connecticut, and the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker expanded from the north. Wild Turkey is a similar but more perplexing story. Exterminated from New England by the early 1800s, the Wild Turkey benefitted from a remarkably successful restoration project beginning in 1975. Numbers grew rapidly and reached a peak by the year 2000. However, since that time Wild Turkey numbers have declined nationally for reasons that are not entirely clear. Nonetheless, the Wild Turkey currently remains relatively common in Connecticut.

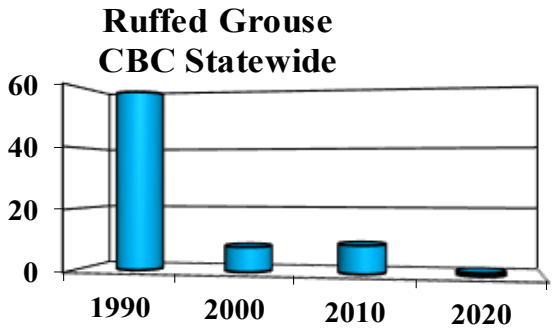
The following graphs demonstrate 30-year population trends for the species discussed above. Connecticut Christmas Bird Count data was utilized in each instance because this count has a relatively consistent database over that period. It is important to note, however, that these same population trends are also readily apparent in the Connecticut Summer Bird Count for each of the species reviewed.

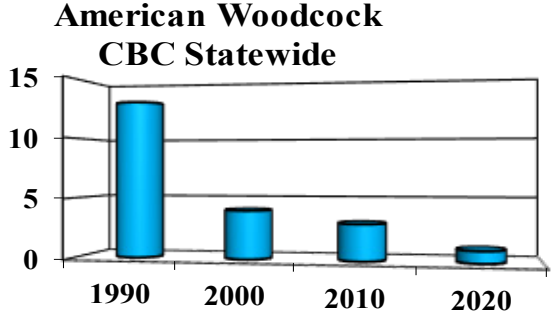


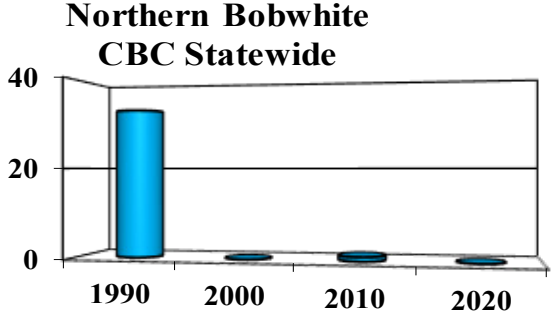




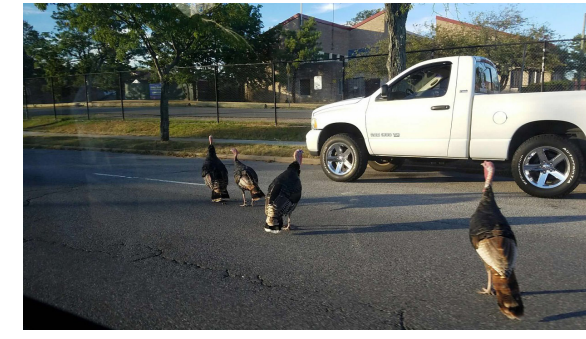






## Avian Biodiversity

Climate change and reforestation are the primary factors driving changes to the avifauna within Connecticut, but even in the face of these impacts the state's overall avian biodiversity has shown considerable resiliency. Statewide bird counts typically show some variability in the total number of individuals, which is to be expected, but are relatively predictable regarding raw species counts. Additionally, biodiversity indicators also reveal a notable level of stability. The Shannon-Weaver Biodiversity Index was developed by ecologists to quantify biological data, generating a single number to reflect the health of an ecosystem. This index is derived from a mathematical model that weighs not only the number of species present but also the number of individuals within each species. Shannon-Weaver Biodiversity Index results can best be understood by following the parameters described below.

*Yellow-bellied Sapsucker has continued to expand while Wild Turkey numbers have recently fallen. (Left photo by Joe Belanger and right photo by William Belanger)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Below 1.0 | Unstable and probably degraded ecosystem |
| 1.5 - 3.0 | Seasonally transitional or damaged ecosystem |
| Above 3.0 | Stable and balanced ecosystem |
| Above 4.5 | Actual results seldom exceed this level |
| 7.0 + | Theoretically possible but unrealistic |

Connecticut scores well using this index, and has a wealth of data to draw from because it performs both summer bird counts and Christmas counts. Summer bird counts typically range between 3.8 and 4.1, while Christmas counts range from 3.1 to 3.5. Christmas count indexes in more northern states routinely drop well below 3.0, reflecting their widespread migratory departures. These northern states probably show breeding indexes comparable to that of Connecticut, but there is a lack of the summer count data needed to demonstrate this. These areas typically perform breeding bird surveys, but these surveys do not quantify data in the same manner as a bird count and therefore cannot be substituted for a summer count.

Connecticut's overall ecosystem is undergoing some noteworthy changes but remains, by definition, stable and healthy. Contrasting examples of unstable ecosystems might include overdeveloped areas, agricultural monocultures or heavily polluted localities. They can also be as simple as arid zones, mountainous terrain or offshore islands. Unstable ecosystems are typically characterized by either low biodiversity indexes or marked volatility in their indexes, neither of which is characteristic of Connecticut.

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# Connecticut Field Notes

*By Greg Hanisek and Frank Mantlik*

*This female Rufous Hummingbird arrived in the Cos Cob section of Greenwich on Nov. 9 and remained deep into winter. (Frank Mantlik)*

**Fall Season, Aug. 1 to Nov. 30, 2023**

The first Greater White-fronted Goose was found on Oct. 20 at Mackenzie Reservoir in Wallingford (JO). An adult **Pink-footed Goose**, now annual, joined the big flocks of Canada Geese on Nov. 2-3 at Broad Brook Mill Pond in East Windsor (JFe et al.). An adult **Barnacle Goose** was at Sydney Fuller Preserve in Suffield, and other nearby locations, on Oct. 28 to Nov. 9 (AW et al.). A Blue-winged Teal was late on Nov. 4 at Great Pond in Simsbury (PDe). Black Scoters are noteworthy in that despite their overall uncommon status, they sometimes drop in briefly on inland sites in significant numbers – such as 43 on Nov. 20 at Nepaug Reservoir in New Hartford (JMe); 34 at both Highland Lake in Winsted on Oct. 23 (DL) and at Bantam Lake in Litchfield on Oct. 30 (MD, BD); and 30 on Nov. 8 at Bantam Lake (MD). A major inland grounding brought 50 Long-tailed Ducks to Coventry Lake in Coventry on Nov. 7 (DM).

The Chimney Swift roost at Mitchell Elementary School in Woodbury held c. 380 on Aug. 19 (RN), with the number swelling to 900+ on Sept. 7 (RN). The first triple-digit flight of Common Nighthawks was 100+ in Woodbury on Aug. 15 (RN). The high count was 450 on Aug. 27 in Winsted (DR). An adult male **Rufous Hummingbird** was found at Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton on Aug. 27 (JK). A female appeared in the Cos Cob section of Greenwich on Nov. 9, remaining through the season and deep into winter (GK, RMc, m.ob.). A disoriented **Yellow Rail** found on Sept. 16 on Gold Star Highway in Groton was rehabilitated and released in a local salt marsh (JD, NN). Amazingly, another one was along Flanders Road, Niantic, Oct. 13, and was also rehabbed and released (NN). The surge in Sandhill Crane numbers was well-illustrated by a huge flight on Nov. 11, when 28 were reported over Quaker Ridge in Greenwich (CEh et al.), 25 were counted at West Rock Ridge State Park in New Haven (TP), and at least 16 were in Pomfret (fide PR).

The post-breeding build up of American Oystercatchers at Milford Point reached 125 on Sept. 11 (JMe et al.). An Upland Sandpiper was at Rocky Hill Meadows on Aug. 15 (BMa, JMe). A remarkable flock of 20 Hudsonian Godwits flew by Penfield Reef in Fairfield on Sept. 23 (JW, AK, CM et al.), and at Sandy Point in West Haven 11 were present the next two days (BR). Two were at Long Beach in Stratford on Nov. 1 (FM). A Marbled Godwit was at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison (hereafter HBSP) from Aug. 3-14 (DI et al.). One was at Milford Point on Aug. 28 (TM), and up to two were at Sandy Point from Aug. 30 to Sept 11 (JO et al). A Stilt Sandpiper was late on Nov. 7 at HBSP (JO). Six White-rumped Sandpipers were a good inland find on Oct. 5 at Rocky Hill Meadows (PDe). **Wilson's Phalaropes** were at HBSP on Aug. 20 (MN) and at Stratford Marina on Sept. 5 (JN et al.). A shorebird highlight was the presence of three **Red-necked Phalaropes** on Aug. 15 at Rocky Hill Meadows (SZ et al.), and one at Glastonbury Meadows the same day (BA). A deceased **Red Phalarope** was found at Shepaug Reservoir in Warren on Oct. 12 (JMa). A sub-adult **Long-tailed Jaeger** was a stunning find on Aug. 26 at HBSP (MN).

The only **Black-headed Gull** was found on Nov. 29 in Stonington, which has produced most of the recent records (RS et al.). The high count for Royal Terns was four on Sept. 26 at Clinton Town Beach (AMc et al.), with the same number on Oct. 1 at Stony Creek docks in Branford (LM). The high count of Black Skimmers was 10 at Sandy Point in West Haven on Aug. 3 (TA). A late one was at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford on Oct. 16 (JA). Away from likely breeding areas, **Mississippi Kites** were on the move at Greenwich Audubon's Quaker Ridge on both Aug. 31 and Oct. 15 (HW) and at Mondo Ponds in Milford on Oct. 1 (GA). The raptor highlight was a juvenile **Swainson's Hawk** on Nov. 12 at Lighthouse Point Park in New Haven (ASe). An early flurry of Rough-legged Hawks, increasingly scarce in recent years, consisted of at least four different sightings from 10-16 Oct at Quaker Ridge and Lighthouse Point Park hawk watches (HW, SMa et al.). A Barn



*Lark Sparrows have been on the increase, but this juvenile present Aug. 21-22 in Fairfield represented an age class seldom reported in the state. (Frank Mantlik)*

Owl was an exciting daytime find on Nov. 19 at HBSP (JC). A Great Egret on Oct. 20 at Southbury Training School was late for an inland location (RN). The season's only **Western Cattle Egret** was at the Norwalk Esplanade on Oct. 16 (BMu). An immature **Roseate Spoonbill**, the state's fourth, was found on Aug. 24 at Milford Point and was seen there and in nearby Stratford through Oct. 8 (RMa, FM, m.ob.).

A late Eastern Wood-Pewee was at Bent of the River Audubon in Southbury on Oct. 5 (RN). Late *Empidonax* flycatchers included an Alder Flycatcher on Nov. 2 at Silver Sands State Park in Milford on Nov. 2 (JO) and a Least Flycatcher in Niantic on Nov. 8 (JFa). A **Western Kingbird** found on Nov. 13 at the Wequetequock Cove Sanctuary in Stonington (JA). It was joined by a second one the next day (BMa et al.), and one remained through Nov. 17. The state's fourth **Bell's Vireo** was present Oct. 21-25 at Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary in Stamford (PDu et al.). A **Cave Swallow** was photographed at Bluff Point in Groton on the unexpected early date of Sept. 6 (RS). It's possible that this rarity was swept northward by the remnants of Hurricane Idalia. Red-breasted Nuthatches were on the move Aug. 21 at Windsor Locks (PDe) and in East Hampton (TB). The only report of a **Sedge Wren** was on Oct. 22 at Tarrywile Park in Danbury (ASp). The first report of American Pipits involved four on Sept. 8 in Mansfield (JS).

It was a great season for **Lark Sparrows** starting with a seldom-reported juvenile Aug. 21-22 at Hoydens Hill Open Space in Fairfield (KW, FM m.ob.). Others were at Great Captain's Island in Greenwich on Aug. 26 (SS); at Allen's Meadow in Wilton on Oct. 18-19 (JBe et al.); at Sherwood Island on Oct. 27-29 (KW, FM m.ob.) and at HBSP on Nov. 10 (CU, AMa et al.). The first of at least 15 Clay-colored Sparrows was found on Sept. 10 at Glastonbury Meadows (BA). A Dark-eyed Junco was an

early arrival Sept. 17 in Southbury (RN). A **LeConte's Sparrow** was an excellent find on Oct. 13 at HBSP (JR et al.). The first Lincoln's Sparrows were reported on Sept. 6 in Stratford (FM) and in Canton (JM). **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** were in Ashford on Nov. 4 (SMo), in Ellington on Nov. 18-19 (CV et al.) and in Trumbull on Nov. 24 (TG). A post-breeding aggregation of Brown-headed Cowbirds at feeders in a Woodbury neighborhood peaked at 94 on Aug. 2, with 91 of the birds juveniles (RN).

An Ovenbird was late on Nov. 2 in New Haven (YX). Golden-winged Warbler is now a significant rarity, so two in the same week at Hoydens Hill Open Space in Fairfield was remarkable – a male on Aug. 22 and a female on Aug. 31 (AK, JP, CM). Other reports came from Aspetuck Reservoir in Easton on Aug. 9 (AK); Stamford Museum and Nature Center on Aug. 21 (BO); and from Sleeping Giant State Park in Hamden on Aug. 28 (WS). The first Connecticut Warbler was found on Aug. 27 during morning flight at HBSP (NB). An exceptional four were reported in Glastonbury on Sept. 20 (BA). The state's third **MacGillivray's Warbler,** an adult male, was highly sought on Nov. 17-19 at Pine Creek Open Space in Fairfield (JP et al.). A Prairie Warbler was late Oct. 28 in East Haddam (DE). A Canada Warbler was southbound at Hop Brook Lake in Naugatuck on Aug. 4 (GH).

The first of 11 **Blue Grosbeaks** turned up at East Shore Park in New Haven on Sept. 16 (JO, AL). All were singles except for two on Oct. 7 at Proto Drive in East Haven (JO, MA). An Indigo Bunting was late Oct. 28 at Pine Creek in Fairfield (AK). The season's first Dickcissel was at Trout Brook Valley in Easton on Aug. 12 (LH), quickly followed by one at Sherwood Island on Aug. 14 (TG).

Observers: George Amato, Mark Aronson, Tim Antanaitis, Bill Asteriades, Joe Attwater, Judith Bachman (JBa), Tom Baptist, Joe Bear (JBe), Nick Bonomo, Jerry Connolly, Paul Desjardins (PDe), Buzz Devine, Michael Doyle, James Duerr, Patrick Dugan (PDu), Cynthia Ehlinger (CEh), Chris Elphick (CEl), Deborah Evans, Adam Fasciolo, Jo Fasciolo (JFa), Jeff Fengler (JFe), Tina Green, Frank Gallo, Greg Hanisek, Larry Havey, Chuck Imbergamo, Dean Irwin, Jay Kaplan, Aidan Kiley, Greg Kramer, Denise LaPerriere, Alex Lin-Moore, Kristof Lysocki, Bob MacDonnell (BMa), Ryan MacLean (RMc), Alan Malina (AMa), Roger Mann (RMa), Frank Mantlik, Jill MacKenzie (JMa), Barry Marsh (BMa), David Mathieu, Steve Mayo (SMa), Chase McCabe, Andy McGann (AMc), Linda Meyer, Jamie Meyers (JMe), Steve Morytko (SMo), Tom Murray, Brendan Murtha (BMu), Jeremy Nance, Russ Naylor, Nicole Neigel, Monica Nichols, John Oshlick, Brian O'Toole, Tom Parlapiano, Bill Rankin, James Purcell, Jack Robbins, Dave Rosgen, Phil Rusch, Will Schenck, Abby Sesselberg (ASe), Sean Sime, Russ Smiley, Joan Smyth, Alton Spencer (ASp), Jory Teltser, Chris Unsworth, Chris Veale, Navin Viswanathan, Harry Wales, Julie Wilson, Abigail Wolcott, Kate Wong, Yangfan Xiao, Sara Zagorski

# Mourning Warbler Songs and Speciation in Birds

*By Christopher S. Wood*

*An expert has been able to provide specific information on the place of origin of this Mourning Warbler, photographed this spring in Southbury. (Christopher S. Wood)*

Mourning Warblers (Geothlypis philadelphia) are a relatively uncommon Spring migrant through Connecticut, with fewer than 10 reported to eBird in April and May of 2024. One cooperative and vocal bird visited Janie Pierce Park in Southbury for several days in late May of 2024, affording photo and recording opportunities. Recordings of this bird's vocalizations were sent to Jay Pitocchelli, a researcher and professor emeritus at St. Anselm College in New Hampshire, who has for several years studied this species. His response described a fascinating fact of bird life and the process of speciation.

Mourning Warblers are closely related to MacGillivray's and Kentucky Warblers, with similar vocalization characteristics, i.e. a "churry churry" quality to some degree, and most birders are aware of the variety of song that wood warblers in general exhibit (as do other species) depending on the point of the

breeding cycle. Those variations, however, are different from the regional variations of the basic territorial song exhibited by the Mourning Warbler.

Pitocchelli's research identified four distinct regional dialects, or "regiolects": Western, Eastern, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. He advised us that the Southbury bird this past Spring was singing the Newfoundland-type song and that Newfoundland birds are found along the southern New England coast during migration.

The research has found that Mourning Warblers of the Western and Newfoundland regiolects respond more aggressively to songs of their own regiolects than to songs of other regiolects, implying "at least partial reproductive isolation at the geographic extremes of the breeding range." In other words, possibly a step in the process of creating a distinct species.

All of this serves to remind birders that there is more to birding than ticking bird names off a list. Listening for birds is often easier than finding them visually among the leaves and with the advent of the Cornell Labs Merlin app, identification by song is easier than ever. Some of us long-time birders lament this, having spent many years learning songs. But candidly, it's a very useful tool and it clearly is attracting more people to the joys of birding. I often run into people who have never tried to identify a warbler from a sparrow, but who gleefully tell me about the 20 birds that Merlin told them they heard.

So listen up! Pay attention to songs, even those of the common birds you see everyday; you may detect something different and learn something new about that bird.

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*Christopher S. Wood, cwood022@gmail.com*

## Adventures in Nocturnal Birding

*By Phil Rusch*

*Northern Saw-whet Owl (Bruce Finnan)*

### Owls and Rails and Sulids - Oh My

So first things first. Let's come up with a list of nocturnal birds. Owls, Rails, Goatsuckers, Bitterns and Night Herons are the first birds that come to mind. How about Mockingbirds, Grasshopper Sparrows, Upland Sandpiper, Cuckoos, and migrating songbirds? Don't forget Woodcock and Snipe. How about Tubenoses? Sulids, huh? Truth is, there are a lot more nocturnal birds than we think.

I have been enamored with the nocturnal world from an early age. Catching fireflies, watching bats, catching glimpses of skunks, raccoons, and flying squirrels in a flashlight beam were all part of growing up in the then wilds of Mystic, CT. I caught the "birding bug" fairly early in life. I went on my first Christmas Count at the age of 12 in December 1972. Haven't missed a New London CBC since, but that is another story. I saw my first owl in the wild about a month after that first count when I was shown a Great Horned Owl nest. I was hooked.

The first group that I searched for was owls, of course. I quickly learned that the way to see owls was to use recordings to bring them into view. I also learned that playback should be used with great care. To this day, I only use playback during surveys like Christmas and Summer Bird Counts, and for the Breeding Bird Atlas.
First the owls.

Now, you have to understand that in the early 70's, the only way for us to get recording of owls to use for playback was to record them off a vinyl 33 1/3 rpm Peterson Field Guide to the Bird Songs Record on to a portable cassette tape. Digital meant something you did with your fingers or toes. So, we had recordings of Great Horned, Barred, and Screech. I really wanted Saw-whet. The call of the Saw-whet wasn't on the Peterson record set. I searched and searched. Finally, I found a recording of a tooting Saw-whet on a flimsy square vinyl 45 that came as an insert with an issue of National Geographic Magazine. I recorded it onto a cassette tape and I was ready. Or so I thought. I still didn't know where to look for them.

On CBC's from 1972-1977, we found a grand total of two owls, and both of them were daytime roosting birds. For count year 1978, we went all out. We started at midnight and we were going to cover everything in the circle east of the Thames River. This night we heard three, a Great Horned, a Barred, and at last a tooting Saw-whet which actually responded to the scratchy recording of that National Geographic square record. We still had a lot to learn, we just didn't know it .
Over the next 35 years, I have developed a habitat search image for Saw-whets, Screech, and Long-eared Owls. Many of my best spots in Groton, Ledyard and Stonington have been swallowed by development and re-growth of forest. During those same 35 years, there have been many memorable pre-dawn adventures.

In count year 1988, I found what I believe was the best Saw-whet Owl winter roost site in the state. Unfortunately, it has since been developed for housing. But from 1988 to 2000, we routinely got from 4-15 Saw-whets from the massive cedar grove on Route 1 in Mystic. During the pre-dawn hours of 28 Dec 1991, we walked into the center of the grove and played our favorite Saw-whet recording. The recording was playing for all of 20 seconds when a Saw-whet landed on a branch about 3 feet in front of us. It proceeded to emit what we call its distress call. The call is actually a scream. As one of the us got the bird in his flashlight, the woods around us erupted with multiple Saw-whet distress screams. Later as we walked down the center of Route 1 at 5:30 AM, we made a quick count of birds on both sides of the road. We agreed that 15 was a low estimate of the birds calling from the cedars, and thickets. The diversity of calls was simply amazing. In addition to the screams and tooting, there were birds mewing like cats, squeaks, and rattle calls that none of us had heard before. What an amazing place.

In the early morning of 19 Dec 1998, I stepped out the back door of my house in



Chaplin to begin owling for the Storrs Christmas Bird Count. The door wasn't even shut, when I heard the duet of a pair of Great Horned Owls. Nice start I thought. Over the next 4 hours, I heard an additional 10 Great Horned Owls. Most were a male and female dueting. I had hit the perfect night. There was a mostly full moon. It was warm for Dec 19, mid 30's. There was no wind and no precipitation. It was if all of the Great Horned Owls in my area decided that this was the night
Next the marsh birds. Rails and bitterns.

Rails are infuriating to me. You pick the perfect night, or so you think, only to come up empty handed. Other nights, the birds will be spontaneously calling. Some nights all you need to do is clap your hands or bang two rocks together. Over the years, I have found countless Virginia and Clapper Rails, lesser numbers of Sora and King Rails, many Least Bitterns, as well as American Bitterns. I've had a hand in finding Black Rails in both Rhode Island and Connecticut. Have you ever seen three grown men jumping and high fiving on a Watch Hill, RI, golf course green at 10:45 PM? What an amazing sight.Thanks Nick for the singing Yellow Rail. A life heard bird. My only nocturnal Yellow Rail.

The sounds that our owls, rails and bitterns make are amazing. Saw-whet and Screech Owls have an amazing array of sounds beyond the traditional toot and trill. The Long eared Owl distress scream will send shivers up your spine and make you think someone is being murdered nearby. The same goes for the scream of a Barn Owl. Both Long-eared and Short-eared Owls bark like a small dog. Barred and Great Horned Owls can produce a single WHOO note that will make you think you heard a Long-eared Owl. I think the most amazing sound that is made by an owl is the monkey like caterwauling of a family group of Barred Owls after the young have fledged in July and August.

Rails, Gallinules, Coot and Cranes produce a wide array of strange calls both nocturnally and diurnally. Most of my experience here in the Northeast is with rails. Every year, I hear a new squeak or gurgle from the marshes of Connecticut.
There are avian wannabes that can cause much confusion. Frogs and toads can confuse the most seasoned of nocturnal birders. Mammals such as Red and Gray Fox, Bobcat, and Fisher all produce an owl-like bark or distress scream.
There are many other cool birds that I have encountered between sunset and sunrise. There were many species of waterfowl including Common Eider, both Night Herons, lots of shorebirds, Horned Lark, Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow. Let's not forget the Wilson's Storm-Petrels that landed on the boat after dark, or the White-faced Storm Petrel that came to the boat's lights as the crew was chumming for Mahi and Tuna

Other memorable evenings were spent watching the Buff-collared Nightjar catching moths in Arizona's California Gulch in the beam of our spot light, or catching the

eye shine of a Poor-will a mile away on the same night. How about listening to a pair of Spotted Owls hooting at each other across a canyon road in California? And actually catching them in the spotlight as they flew back and forth? That same night in California, we had Great Horned, Northern Pygmy Owl, Western Screech Owl, and Northern Saw-whet Owl all calling without using playback.
One item that would seem to make sense would be to alert the local police that you will be out in the pre-dawn hours stopping in odd locations and playing strange recordings. Don't bother. I've tried both ways. Invariably we always were stopped, questioned, and told that no mention of us was made at roll call. I actually got to know one of the officers of the Groton Long Point Police Force who seemed to show up with lights flashing every year just as the Long-eared Owl responded to our playback. OK, it only happened twice.

Once in a while you actually need the police, An early morning walk into the WMCA camp on Gungywamp Road in Groton had yielded us two Barred Owls. On the walk out at 3:30 AM, as we were nearing the road, we heard the screeching of tires followed by the sound of a car crash. We got to the crash site to discover a car had failed to make the corner, and had instead found the stone wall. The driver's side door was open and the driver was nowhere to be found. I ran to the nearest house, and asked the occupants to call 911. The police arrived, took our statements, and said we could leave. Turns out the driver was wandering in the woods and wasn't found until 8 AM. And the funniest part of the story? The police never asked us what we were doing there at 3AM with a tape recorder, flashlights, and binoculars.
Finally there's the Sulid.

There were four of us (You know who you are) getting off a boat in Galilee, RI, at 10 PM after a 24 hour pelagic trip to Block Canyon. We had a great trip, first Rhode Island record of Band-rumped Storm Petrel, fourth Rhode Island record of Black-capped Petrel, Long-tailed Jaeger etc. We discover that there is a Brown Booby at Corporation Beach in Dennis MA. The bird is possibly viewable from the parking lot using the cars headlights. It is a life bird for three of us. What the hell, why not. Off we go!!! We get to the lot at about 1 AM to discover that the bird is not on the jetty. A phone call to our source at 1:15 AM gives us an alternate location to find the bird. So, with flashlight and spotting scope, we proceed to locate the Brown Booby at 1:30 AM. Much rejoicing was had by all including a local dog walker out for a stroll. The drive home was uneventful and we were all back home by 6 AM.

I would like to thank Jay Hand, formerly of Connecticut, for getting me started in nocturnal birding. Thanks to many others that have accompanied me over the years, but a big shout out goes to Glenn Williams and Nick Bonomo for contributing the most to the continuing insanity that is nocturnal birding. May it continue for many years in the future.

## Photo Challenge

*By Frank Mantlik*

You're out birding your local patch of salt marsh in early spring, and you find a flock of early-migrant Greater Yellowlegs foraging in the muddy channels. A Northern Harrier glides over and spooks the flock into flight. They land on the water and begin swimming, alert as they go. This is a fairly unusual behavior for some shorebirds, but less so for Yellowlegs.

It's then that you realize one bird looks quite different in color, shape, and bill size. Being slightly smaller and with a shorter bill, could it be a Lesser Yellowlegs? No, several things look off for a yellowlegs. Instead of a gray look to the plumage, it's a uniform warm brown. And the upperpart feathers (scapulars, wing coverts, and tertials) look quite large and pale-fringed, much different than the appearance of the adjacent Yellowlegs. The beak is quite different as well: entirely black, relatively short, and quite broad at the base, tapering to a dull point. What could this bird be?

As luck would have it, the flock swims to the muddy shore and resumes foraging at the water's edge. We could see that its legs are relatively shorter, and are a dull yellow; not the bright yellow of the Yellowlegs. We could also see, due to a wind gust, that its long, boldly-barred tertials are often swept up from the back. Plus we note that it is foraging more slowly and deliberately than the adjacent frantic Yellowlegs.

This combination of field marks and behavior point to only one possible species: Ruff. It is a common Eurasian species that is rare but nearly annual in Connecticut.

I photographed this female Ruff (also known as a Reeve), found by Linda Olsen, at Mac's Harbor, Stratford, on 1 April 2024.

**Next Challenge Photo**


## THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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