





763-01-2004

PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM

This form is presented as a convenience and guide. It can be used if desired, but is not necessary for submitting a report. Species requiring documentation are those on the Review List or not on the Official List of Birds of Pennsylvania. Send documentation to:

Nick Pulcinella, Secretary
Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee
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West Chester, PA 19380
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SPECIES: MacGillivray's Warbler, *Oporornis tolmiei*
Subspecies not known

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS 1 **SEX** female

AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S): Appeared to be first winter.

DATE OF OBSERVATION 12/18/04 and 12/19/04 **TIME** 1-1:30 PM approx. both days.

LOCATION Rodale Institute, Sigfreidale Road, eastern Berks County, PA

EXACT SITE Approximately ¼ mile past the Rodale Institute, to the right side along Sigfreidale Rd, along stream 100 feet across the road from the first farmhouse west of the Rodale Institute (12/18/04). About 100 yards farther east along same stream next day (12/19/04).

OBSERVER REPORTING:

Todd A. Watkins
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OTHER OBSERVERS: Bernie Morris, Kathy Sieminski and Alan Jennings. This bird was first spotted by Alan Jennings during our Allentown CBC group outing on 12/18/04. (Also, many dozens of observers saw the same bird the next day, 12/19/2004, after Bernie reported it to the CBC and both Bernie and I posted it on the PABIRDS listserv).

HABITAT Marshy grass and dense brush surrounding a small stream running through a largely agricultural area on either side of the muddy/marshy spot. A few widely spaced small trees alongside the stream. Good habitat for the Northern Harrier, many White Crowned Sparrows and a Swamp Sparrow we saw in the same area that day. The surrounding hundreds of acre Rodale Institute conducts experimental organic farming. If there is such a thing as agrarian riparian, this might be it.

DISTANCE TO BIRD: When first seen, it was roughly 12-15 feet in front of us, near the ground, when first we watched. Bird came and went for about 25 minutes, so I moved to the opposite side of the brush and was about 20 feet away then. Second day views were more distant, about 30-50 feet, as there was a horde of other people about too.

VIEWING CONDITIONS First sighting: Cloudy, but bright enough for me to be wearing my wide-brimmed hat. Cool, about 35 degrees, slight breeze. Lovely winter afternoon. We got quite good looks and color. Second day: not nearly as nice, just lifting fog, dreary gray, 30 degrees, slight breeze. Would be a day for a fire inside.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED Leica 8x32 BA binoculars. Next day, refound the bird, and poorly filmed (with decent audio) with Sony Handycam DCR-DVD200.

DESCRIPTION & BEHAVIOR

Wood warbler shape and size, pink legs, uniform all green-olive upperparts and tail, dull/light gray-green "hood," all yellow belly, flanks and undertail coverts, whitish gray throat with no yellow tinges, obvious but broken eye ring. No wing bars, no contrasting feather edges, nor streaking on breast or belly.

Behaviorally, the first day (12/18/2004, yesterday) it was foraging actively near the ground along the branches in shrubs on either side and over a moist grassy stream, flitting about up down and back and forth rather quickly, a bit like a chickadee or kinglet, though much lower to the ground like Common Yellowthroat. Also flicked its tail fairly regularly. A rather jumpy, skittish bird.

The next day (12/19/2004, today) when I went back to look for it again, the bird was much less active (the day was foggy and colder), skulking in dense brush away from the stream for long periods, then becoming quite active for short periods, mostly low near the muddy ground in dense brush, occasionally coming to near the top of the brush or moving about under the long grasses. Only when a less patient birder (against several protests from onlookers) intentionally flushed it did it fly out and move to another brushy area, moving from one brush island, to another, to another, then into another, all in quick succession. This second day I got brief looks on an off for about an hour, and heard calls intermittently throughout.

VOCALIZATIONS

On our first sighting, I did not hear any localization that I was sure was its. When I went back the next day, the relocated bird called repeatedly, a sharp "tik" or "tchik, tchik." Recorded the call on a video camera, and was able to compare it at home to on-line recordings. Visual ID, beyond body shape and vague greenish color, is not possible on the poor video, but sound is clear and distinct.

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES

Size and overall shape put it in the small category of warblers and vireos. Narrow sharp beak ruled out vireos or chat. Body shape distinct from old-world warblers. Overall color and size made the quick first impression that it might be a Common Yellowthroat or, with the eye-ring, a Nashville Warbler. Quickly ruled these out with complete yellow underparts, pink legs, light grayish hood and broken eye ring. Broken eye ring also eliminated Connecticut Warbler. Closest possibility would be a first winter female Mourning Warbler, but its throat was clearly whitish. Some first winter Mourning's apparently have whitish too, but the broken eye ring struck me as more substantive than the Mourning's in several guides I've looked at, including Peterson's "Warblers." Sibley's and National Geographic. Finally, on going back the next day, the repeated sharp "tchik" call note separated it from the Mourning's call on the on-line Cornell Lab of Ornithology recordings.

SIMILAR EXPERIENCE

Never saw MacGillivray's, Mourning or Connecticut before, but have spent many spring and fall migration days in Cape May or Bombay Hook and so am familiar with most of the common wood warblers of the East Coast, and certainly seen lots of Common Yellowthroat. Lived and birded in England several years ago, and made several other European birding trips, enough to be comfortable that this is not an old-world warbler.

ARE YOU POSITIVE ABOUT IDENTIFICATION?

Nearly so. This was about as good a look as one ever gets with warblers: down low, close by and in good light, for many minutes and from multiple angles. Either this is a MacGillivray's or a Mourning with a fatish eye-ring, or something I'm unaware of and even more completely out of place and not in US or European field guides. That said, as best I can tell from some web-surfing afterwards, Mourning would be even rarer in the winter in the East than MacGillivray's. There have been a couple confirmed MacGillivray's over the last few years in mid December in the Eastern US and Canada, so the timing is right. In the field we consulted the Sibley's guide, and reluctantly ruled out everything else, all while actually looking at the bird. Nevertheless, I left with some remaining uncertainty, given the very rare nature of the sighting, and grew a bit more hesitant at home reading the Peterson "Warblers" book's detailed discussion of the possible confusion and difficult overlap with some white-throated variations in Mourning Warbler, particularly because we had no vocalization that first afternoon. But the recorded calls from the return visit, combined with the white throat and clear fairly heavy broken eye-ring, and the skittish behavior strike me as convincing, short of having the bird in hand. Every sign here points me in the same direction, so I'm as sure as I ever am with any sighting. Even that ignored Robin might have been a Fieldfare. Given my own sense of somewhat amateur inadequacies as a bird ID juvenile myself (some sparrows and flycatchers and juvenile gulls drive me nuts), if we'd not gotten so good a look at it, for so long, comparing it with guide in hand, and then compared the recorded calls to some on line, I'd probably not report this one. I'm guessing that this one report won't be enough, given that MacGillivray's is a huge PA rarity. So, I do hope other people who saw it today and perhaps in the coming days will get better photos than the useless ones I got, to corroborate, and to ease the difficult decision to add it to the PA state list.

REFERENCES CONSULTED

During: had my Sibley's Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America, which we consulted while looking directly at the bird on and off for about 25 minutes.

Afterward, about 90 mins later: The Sibley's Guide to Birds, Peterson Field Guides: Warblers, National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, the on-line Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (particularly the recorded calls) as well as Collins Pocket Guide to Birds of Britain & Europe.

DATE OF THIS REPORT: Dec 19, 2004 (same afternoon as second day revisit).

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: MacGillivray's Warbler (Oporonis tolmiei)

Date of Sighting: 18 December 2004 to 20 December 2005

Location: RODALE INSTITUE

County : BERKS

Observer(s): Todd Watkins, Bernie Morris, Kathy Sieminski, Alan Jennings et al.

Date of Submission: 2004, 2005

Submitted by: Todd Watkins, Peter Robinson, Devich Farbotnik

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

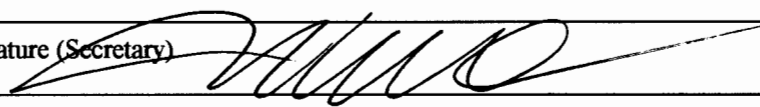
Specimen: No

Recording: Video

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut								
D. Heathcote <i>Overate</i>	X							
P. Guris	X							
J. Stanley	X							
E. Witmer	X							
R. Leberman <i>Heller</i>	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	6							
DECISION	X							

Comments: *6/6*

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

7/27/05