

PA Rare Bird Report

Submission Date	2020-11-04 13:15:42
Observer's Name	Tessa Rhinehart
E-mail	tessa.rhinehart@gmail.com
Observer's Address	United States
Species (Common Name)	Black-throated Gray Warbler
Species (Scientific Name)	Setophaga nigrescens
Number of individuals	1
Observation Date and Time	11-02-2020 8:00 AM
Did you submit this sighting to eBird?	Yes
Link to eBird checklist	https://ebird.org/checklist/S75734045
County	McKean
Location (City, Borough, Township)	Bradford Township
Exact Site (E.g. Name of park, lake, road)	Marilla Reservoir
GPS coordinates of sighting	41.954585, -78.740682
Habitat	Edge of hemlock forest surrounding a small reservoir
Distance to bird	about 20 ft
Viewing conditions	Good light (diffuse; overcast but not backlit) and unobscured viewing (on the edge of a group of sparsely planted hemlocks)
Optical equipment used	Bushnell 8x42 binocular

Description

This comment is similar to the comment I put on my eBird checklist, but with added detail. I only saw the bird for a short period of time and I didn't manage to get a photo, so I have attempted to be as detailed as possible, at the risk of sounding completely unhinged. I thought through this description in my head within 20 minutes of seeing the bird, but only wrote it down when I got home about an hour later.

I was watching a grebe from a fishing platform next to a lawn/parking lot area when I heard a "chewy-sounding" warbler chip surprisingly close behind me. It sounded similar to a Yellow-rumped Warbler chip. I turned around, expecting to find a brown fall-plumaged Myrtle Warbler, and instead saw a grayscale bird in a tree about 15 feet in front of me. It was feeding in the lowest branches of a hemlock, perhaps 15 feet off the ground.

Even before I had my binoculars up I recognized the black-and-white color blocks of a Black-throated Gray Warbler. I saw the bird in profile, slightly angled away from me and got an excellent, unobstructed look at its face pattern. It had a rich, fully black cheek. It had a black cap at the very top of its head. And it had a bold, thick white supercilium. At the angle I saw the bird, I did not get a good look at the throat or the lore, nor did I register whether the bird had wingbars, as I was very focused on the face pattern, especially that white rectangular supercilium. The white supercilium seemed to start right above its eye. I did note that it had a grayish back and a white underside, and I noticed a small amount of black streaking on its side.

After looking at the bird for several seconds, I felt certain this was a Black-throated Gray Warbler, and put my binoculars down. Then I remembered, having just seen this species last month in Arizona, that this warbler could be mistaken for a chickadee at the wrong angle or with a fleeting glance (although I never experienced the opposite mistake of initially thinking that a chickadee was a Black-throated Gray). I put my binoculars up again and took careful note of the facial pattern, which I was satisfied was indeed a black cheek patch, a white supercilium, and a black cap.

Finally, I put my binoculars down again to fumble for my phone to take a picture, but by the time I looked up and had gotten my phone out, the bird was gone. I then played the Black-throated Gray chip using a phone app and confirmed that the call matched what I had just heard less than a minute ago. I broadcast the chip note once and the song twice with my phone but got no response, and not wanting to use excessive playback on a possibly stressed vagrant, I did not play any more sounds.

The chickadee flock sounded like it continued west down the trail, but unfortunately, I could not refind the warbler in or near the flock, although I was listening carefully for it to call again. I walked the rest of the loop counter-clockwise and came across at least two more flocks of chickadees. They were all foraging low in the trees.

Behavior (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

The bird chipped several times then did not call again while I was looking at it. I saw it sitting relatively still on a low branch of a hemlock, sitting angled horizontally/slightly upwards, and slightly away from me. It sat relatively still for 3 seconds or so, then picked something off of a branch. It then flew up about 3 feet onto another branch and picked something off of that branch.

There was a flock of several chickadees farther down the path into the woods, but the bird I saw was not actually within or near the flock. I did not see any other passerines nearby while I saw the Black-throated Gray, nor did I see any in the immediate area after the Black-throated Gray disappeared.

Separation from similar species (How you eliminated others)

In breeding plumage, an adult male Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warbler shares the Black-throated Gray's face pattern and overall color palette, but at this time of year, they are warm brown and lack the contrasting face pattern.

One potential confusion species could be a late Black-and-white Warbler, which I have ample experience with and believe I would have recognized. In the fall, BAWW do not have fully dark cheek patches (usually white cheek with a black eyeline, sometimes mottled black) and would have a variegated black and white, not solid gray, back. The bird was perching on branches, not foraging in the more typical nuthatch-like way of a Black-and-white Warbler. The reservoir is rimmed with a nearly-entirely hemlock forest, whereas Black-and-white Warblers are typically associated with deciduous areas. Furthermore, a Black-and-white Warbler in November would be almost as infrequently reported as a Black-throated Gray Warbler (just a handful of Nov records for PA on eBird, only two of which are from the western half of the state).

Ironically, I believe a more concerning confusion species for Black-throated Gray Warblers is not a warbler, but instead, a Black-capped Chickadee. The GISS of the bird was that it had a "longer" and less spherical body shape than a chickadee, a flat head, and more of a neck. At the angle at which I observed the bird, a chickadee should have shown a huge, triangular pale patch on its cheek; instead, the marking I saw was a thinner white rectangle. A chickadee would have had to have been looking over its shoulder to create anything close to that impression of a rectangle of white, but as the bird reached away from me to pluck something off of a branch, the face pattern didn't seem to change. The call, which it gave 3-4 times, was also clearly that of a warbler.

Discussion – anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

It is notable that Black-throated Gray Warblers have been found in several states across the east coast this year, including in Pennsylvania.

I felt entirely sure that this bird was a Black-throated Gray Warbler while I was looking at it. I only decided to put my binoculars down to attempt a photo when I felt confident about the identification. The quality of the look was good--the bird wasn't moving around much, and in fact, it was a closer look than my previous experiences with Black-throated Grays. If I had been in the southwest, I would have added a Black-throated Gray Warbler to my checklist without much thought.

I also note that no call or call series that chickadees make could have been mistaken for the lower, huskier chip I heard. It sounded similar to but not quite like the chip of a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a species that I am usually able to identify by chip note alone. Furthermore, when I played the chip note to myself immediately after the bird left the area, when the call was still fresh in my mind, I thought, "Awesome, that is definitely what I heard!" I was hearing a distant flock of chickadees while I watched the bird, which provided a direct comparison, and listened in vain to chickadees afterward, never hearing them make any vocalizations that sounded like the chip I heard.

However, my look was short: more than 5 seconds but less than 10 seconds. After the fact, when I couldn't get a picture or refind the bird, I started to doubt myself: could I really have seen a Black-throated Gray Warbler? What if I saw a chickadee at exactly the wrong angle? Could I have imagined the details that I thought I saw? Will anyone believe this report? I did closely watch chickadees for the rest of my time at the reservoir, and noted that at no angle did any chickadee look similar to the bird I saw. I saw many chickadees, and never thought "Oh, is that the warbler?"

I attempted to refind the bird the next day with no luck. The chickadee flocks were foraging much higher in the trees than they had been on the previous day.

Are you positive of your identification ? (Why or why not)

I was when I initially saw the bird, but I am doubting myself because I didn't get a picture (see above)

During

Merlin phone application to play BTYW chip

After

Macaulay Library images of BTYW, BCCH, BAWW

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