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A NESTING OF THE BLUE-WINGED WARBLER IN MASSACHUSETTS.

BY HORACE W. WRIGHT.

IN A trip for general bird-observation to Sudbury, Massachusetts, on May 19, 1909, upon taking a different road back to the railroad station in the afternoon from that which I had intended to take, I came upon two warblers calling near the roadside, whose call-notes attracted my notice as not so familiar that I could name the species from which they came. So turning up a side road a few steps and bringing my field glass upon one of the two, I perceived that it was apparently a Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora pinus*). The second bird, which was undoubtedly the female, at once disappeared from sight, and I did not have an opportunity to view her. But I was able to keep in sight the male bird in his successive flights from one tree to another and in his movements through the branches of a good-sized elm in which he busied himself in obtaining food. The elm was one of several which stand immediately by the State highway through Sudbury to Marlboro. As I obtained full and near views of him again and again in his successive perches, once at not longer range than twenty-five feet and only slightly above the level of my eye, my first identification of the bird was established beyond a doubt. Presently the warbler gave the locust-like song for which I had been waiting, gave it a half-dozen times, *swe-e-e-e-e ze-e-e-e*, quite as described by Mr. F. L. Burns in Chapman's 'Warblers of North America.' The movements of the bird

were active but not restless. Twice an automobile, passing on the highway under the elms, started the Bluewing from his busy search for food among the leaves, and he flew back each time to the sapling in which I had had my first view of him. The return to the roadside elms, however, was quickly made each time. Before I passed on to get my train I had spent a half-hour with this warbler, enjoying my first experience with the species, very rare as a visitant to Massachusetts, so far as records indicate, and never having been known to nest within the borders of the State.

Mr. William Brewster, in a foot-note to Minot's 'Land-Birds and Game-Birds of New England,' states: "This Warbler is a common summer resident of southern Connecticut, but is not known to occur regularly north of Hartford, and is most numerous in the country immediately bordering on the Sound and in the lower valley of the Connecticut River. Several specimens have been taken in Massachusetts, where, however, the species does not seem to have attained a permanent foothold."

There are only six recorded occurrences of the Blue-winged Warbler in Massachusetts. Four of these are given in Messrs. Howe and Allen's 'Birds of Massachusetts,' published in 1901, namely: "a small flock" at Dedham about the 12th or 15th of May, 1857, found by E. A. Samuels; a male bird captured at West Roxbury on May 17, 1878, by Mr. C. N. Hammond; one seen at Dorchester on May 15, 1897, by Forster H. Brackett; and one taken at Taunton by J. H. Morse (date unknown). To these occurrences Mr. Wells W. Cooke, in his 'Distribution and Migration of North American Warblers,' adds a fifth, that of a bird seen at Framingham on May 13, 1896 (observer's name not given); and 'The Auk' of July, 1902, p. 291, adds a sixth, that of a singing male bird seen at Waverly on May 29, 1902, by Mr. Guy Emerson.

To my friend, Mr. Eugene E. Caduc, in whose ripe intelligence and patient sagacity as a bird-observer I had acquired a full measure of confidence through many rambles afield with him, I conveyed the news of my happy discovery, and two days later, on May 21, he visited the haunt by the roadside where I had seen the pair and heard the male bird sing. I was unable to accompany him. His written statement of his trip in part is: "I came upon the birds about 2.30 in the afternoon. I soon discovered that the female was

busy collecting nesting-material. I watched her for perhaps three-quarters of an hour. Three different times she disappeared in the underbrush and returned to the roadside for more material. I was not able to locate the nest, however. During all this time the male bird perched on a nearby tree singing, but took no part in the building of the nest. A dog in chase of a chipmunk frightened them, and I saw them no more." Mr. Caduc describes the female bird as similar in coloration to the male bird, only slightly duller.

On May 26, about 10 A. M., I again visited the spot and after waiting a half-hour heard the Bluewing's song. The singing was maintained for about a half-hour, and then there was another equal period when I could not hear the song or get evidence of the bird. The female bird was neither seen nor heard. The male moved about through the same trees as before, but took a somewhat wider range. The singing haunt of the male consisted of a small mowing-plot cornering at the roadside and backed by a pasture of considerable extent containing an orchard of old apple trees which reached back in succession for nearly a quarter of a mile. The pasture was dotted also with chestnut trees. Beside the mowing was a swampy hollow through which flowed a brook coming down through the pasture from a wooded hillside in the rear. On the other side of the mowing-plot the land rose also to pasture and to second-growth woodland composed of white and pitch pines, birches, oaks, and cedars, with berry bushes as undergrowth and the surface where exposed covered with dry moss. The elms, which proved a favorite feeding and singing place of the male bird, stood beside the highway in front of this woodland. Thus at the spot chosen by this pair of warblers there is much diversity of natural feature. The location is also within a mile and in sight of the old Wayside Inn made famous by Longfellow in his poem entitled 'Tales of a Wayside Inn.' On this second occasion in the forenoon I found these other warbler voices united with the Bluewing's, the Goldenwing's, the Nashville's, the Yellow's, the Chestnut-side's, the Black-throated Green's, the Oven-bird's, the Yellow-throat's, and the Redstart's.

On May 29, upon further expressions of urgent desire on my part for more knowledge as to the nesting of these Bluewings, Mr. Caduc made a second visit to the locality, arriving about 9.30 in

company with Mr. and Mrs. Edmund E. Bridge. They found the male bird feeding and in song in a pasture perhaps fifty feet from the highway. He seemed to be dividing his time between the apple and the elm trees. Mr. Caduc states that all three had an excellent view of the warbler before he flew away and that the others then continued their walk, while he set himself to the task of locating the nest. His statement is: "I remained to await developments. I found a seat on a stone, well screened by a barberry bush, and waited for a half-hour, when the male bird returned to the same locality as before. For three-quarters of an hour he continued feeding and uttering the same song as when first seen. He then changed to a call-note not unlike that of a Chipping Sparrow. Very soon I detected an answer being made and the female bird was seen for the first time [that day]. She flew to a pool in a swampy section of the same pasture and bathed freely. Then alighting on the same tree with her mate she was completing her toilet, when to my surprise she flew to a black ant hill and took a dust bath much after the manner of the House Sparrow. This done, she again returned to the pool and drank freely, but I could not see that she bathed again. Up to this time I do not think that she had eaten anything, but she now began searching for food, and in a more hurried manner than her mate. Passing from tree to tree both birds soon showed me my real work had now begun. I had no difficulty in following them, however, often being within three or four feet of them, as they moved on feeding from one tree to another. They did not seem to fear me. Neither bird gave voice to any note whatever as over the pasture they led me and then about two hundred feet into a wood. This wood was composed of chestnuts, oaks, maples, birches, and white pines, mostly of second growth, with considerable underbrush including tangles of horsebriar and wild grape, and with a brook flowing near by. Here the female bird took to the ground and finally was lost to view behind a decayed stump about a foot high and a growth of fern. A wagon-road had been cut through the wood, and this I had been able to follow up to this point. But in order to follow her course through the underbrush I was obliged to assume a crouching attitude, and it became necessary to approach on all-fours, as her point of disappearance was about fifteen feet from the road. In this manner

I proceeded to the stump, when she took wing. Carefully parting the ferns, I saw a nest containing four eggs of the warbler and an egg of a Cowbird. The latter I removed, and on breaking it I could discover no sign of incubation. The four eggs were all of about the same shape, but very much smaller at one end. Three were well mottled with brown spots, and the fourth appeared to be pure white. The nest was of coarse material lined with fine strips of bark or something of that kind. It was a cup-shaped structure, built on a lump of earth held securely in position by two exposed roots of the stump, and raised two or three inches from the ground. It was further protected by the ferns. From the place by the roadside, from which the pair started and where the male bird was found each time singing and the female had bathed, to the nest-location was about twelve hundred feet. In the immediate vicinity of the nest were also the nests of Wood Thrush, Oven-bird, Towhee, Yellow Warbler, and Flicker."

Mr. Caduc thus accomplished his purpose, which was "to camp with the birds" until he found their nest, and he brought back to me in most satisfying fulness the details as given above. But although he had furnished me a careful description of the location of the nest, when I went again on May 31, I came away without seeing it, not finding it readily and fearing to trample about the haunt lest I disturb the mother-bird and be the means of failure to the nesting. And the one important thing, as we regarded it, was that the nesting should go successfully through and the young be reared. Thereby the planting of the species in this locality or in the State might be secured. We, therefore, imparted our knowledge of the nesting site to no one; for had we done so, the nest was no longer in our keeping, and we could not foresee what might happen to prevent the rearing of this family. So I made no further visits to the place and left it with Mr. Caduc to make such periodical visits as would ensure a knowledge, if possible, of how the nesting progressed and what its issue would be. How well he timed his visits for gaining all the essential facts, extracts from his letters to me after I had left the city will show.

On this last visit which I made I heard the male Bluewing sing as usual by the roadside, a spot so far away from the nest, nearly a quarter of a mile, indeed, that his mate could never have heard his voice, as day after day he sang there.

In the vicinity of the nesting spot of the Bluewings I heard among other songs the songs of Wood Thrush, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Scarlet Tanager. Two Canadian Warblers also sang there. Whether these were summer resident or migrant birds I could not determine at that time. Also not far away I came upon a silent Hermit Thrush. The date was late for a migrant bird, and it may have been, therefore, a summer resident. Two miles away in the same town on May 12 I had heard a Hermit Thrush sing as freely and finely at mid-day as the voices of the species are regularly heard in the White Mountains, and I could not think that this beautiful songster was other than a resident bird. In three separate pieces of woodland in this town of Sudbury the song of the Blue-headed Vireo was also heard up to the end of May, and one pair of the birds was seen, indicating probable nestings of that species.

On June 6 the next visit to the nest was made by Mr. Caduc. He wrote me: "I found the female bird at home and on the nest. The ferns had been gnawed off close to the ground by some animal. There were but four eggs in the nest. (Our query had been whether it would be found that another egg had been laid by the warbler or, perchance, that the Cowbird had deposited another egg.) I was not able to either see or hear the male bird."

On June 9 another visit was made. Mr. Caduc writes: "Again the mother bird was at home to receive me. As she left the nest, I observed that there were three little bald birdlings there and that the last egg had a crack in it, showing the wee thing in frantic efforts to be liberated. I remained just long enough to see this and then left. Again she gave no cry of alarm on leaving the nest. She lit on a bramble near by, and I could see with my glass that she was all of a tremble. I found other visitors also at the little nest and learned what it was that destroyed the ferns, a mother cottontail and four little ones. They were having such a feast on what was left I hated to frighten them away. There were young in the Wood Thrush's nest also. I also found near the thrush's nest a nest of flying squirrels."

Mr. Caduc again visited the nest on June 15. He writes: "Well, Mr. and Mrs. Bluewing and their four children send you their greeting and hope you have enjoyed yourself to-day as much as

they have. Now for details. I arrived at the little pool of water by the roadside at about 3.15, and there was the male bird having his bath. It required just thirteen minutes after I arrived for him to finish his toilet. I required no glass to see him. I simply leaned on the fence-rail and looked down on him. As soon as he had finished he just quietly stole away without my being able to detect him in the act. I then started for the nest. No one was at home when I arrived but the babies; but four pair of bright little eyes watched me intently, not at all alarmed, as shown by one of them standing up and shaking himself. I then had a chance to see that this one at least was feathered enough to show the prevailing colors of the parents, not so bright, of course, a sort of dusky olive on the back and the underparts of a buff tinge. I had been there but a short time when one of the parent birds came with a mouthful of green worms that were fed out to two of the nestlings, the largest bird not being chosen this time. This was exactly 3.46 by my watch. Soon both parent birds were busy feeding and until 4.45 the little ones were fed on an average every minute and a half. It seemed to me also as if each parent fed the same two little ones all the time. During the hour's observation there was not a sound from either the old or the young birds. All the little ones stood up to get their food, so I could see that they all showed about the same color. Two, however, were quite a little larger than the others. None of the little ones left the nest, but I have not the slightest idea they will be there on my next call, and I may not see them again; but I regard them now as out of danger."

On his next visit, June 18, Mr. Caduc found the nest empty. The young were being fed by one of the parents in a clump of trees in a small clearing of the wood not far from the nesting-site. He states: "I saw all four of the young birds, but only one parent bird. The young were perched about three feet from the ground, and when the parent bird appeared with food, they flew to her with open mouths. If they made any calls, I failed to hear them. Indeed, I cannot remember having heard a sound or call of any kind from either of the birds since the day I found the nest." Mr. Caduc brought the empty nest with him to Boston. He describes the nest as not just like the one described by Mr. Burns in Chapman's 'Warblers,' stating, "I see no evidence of the lining being

laid across, and the leaves are so old and withered it is difficult to tell how they are arranged. Probably before the young had been raised and the nest trodden out of shape, it might have appeared more like the nest described by Mr. Burns. It is in pretty good condition. A small part of it broke off as I was taking it up, but it is not damaged much. The nest, as it rested, was backed up to a decayed stump between two exposed roots. In removing it the back became somewhat damaged and fell off as soon as removed. In its original location it had more of a cup-shape than now. It seems to have spread some, but by pressing the two ends gently you can get a very correct idea of how it looked when discovered."

The six visits of Mr. Caduc, therefore, resulted in determining these six essential facts: the building of a nest; the location of the nest and its holding four eggs of the warbler and a Cowbird's egg, the destruction of the latter removing a menace to the successful rearing of the family; that four eggs in this nesting was the complete set; that three of the birdlings were hatched and the fourth hatching; that they had thriven and were almost grown; and that they were safely on the wing under the care of one at least of the parent birds. A happy consummation of the birds' choice in pressing their way onward into Massachusetts and selecting this spot in Sudbury for their nesting. The consummation furnishes also a basis for a hope that we may soon again have another nesting of Blue-winged Warblers chronicled in the State and in time, perhaps, another warbler added to the list of those regularly resident in Massachusetts. We have done nothing to cut off such a hope, while we have secured all the important facts pertaining to this first recorded nesting of the species within the State.

To Mr. Caduc we are wholly indebted for the full knowledge of this first nesting, and he has kindly permitted me to give it to the readers of 'The Auk.' Each trip made, and six were taken, consisted of forty miles by rail and a three-mile walk. Sudbury is situated twenty miles westward from Boston.

With respect to the date of this nesting and its successive stages it may be well to condense the facts. The birds were found on May 19. The female was seen carrying nest-material on May 21. Presumably the nest was completed as early as May 24. The nest was located and contained four eggs on May 29. The eggs

were presumably laid, May 26 to 29. Incubation probably began on May 29. Eleven days later, June 9, there were three birdlings and the fourth egg was hatching. Period of incubation was ten or eleven days. Six days later the nestlings were well grown. Three days later, June 18, the nest was empty and the birdlings were upon boughs of near trees fed by one of the parent birds. The nestlings left the nest on the eighth or ninth day.

This nesting was a week later than that given account of by Mr. B. S. Bowdish at Demarest, New Jersey, in 1905 [Auk, Jan., 1906, p. 16]. On May 12 Mr. Bowdish found the female "with a dead oak leaf in her bill." On the 15th he found the nest "built under a dead branch, near the base of a small cedar, and entirely covered with dead oak leaves, so laid as to leave only a mouse-like entrance. At this time no eggs had been laid, the nest seeming to be just finished. The first egg was laid on the 19th, and one egg added each day, the fifth and last egg being deposited May 23. The eggs hatched June 2, the tenth day after deposition." On the other hand this nesting was four days earlier than that which Mr. Burns gives in detail as watched by him at Berwyn, Pennsylvania, in which instance five young were just hatched on June 13 at 6.30 P. M. and the nest was vacated on June 21 at 6.12 P. M., eight days after incubation was completed.

The Sudbury birds would seem, therefore, to have lost no time in choosing a nesting-spot and carrying forward their happy plan for a family. This promptness of action, if it should not be termed earliness of procedure, suggests the thought that perhaps the ground was not entirely strange to them. This idea is somewhat strengthened by the record of the Blue-winged Warbler seen at Framingham on May 13, 1896. The latter town and Sudbury adjoin.

Although the Sudbury male Blue-winged Warbler is the only one of the species which I have spent time with and seen again and again upon three successive visits, yet on May 10, 1905, at Belmont, I had a momentary very clear view of a warbler of this species. I wrote down a description of its plumage on the spot, and I have had no reason to doubt the identification in the subsequent years. But as I could not announce the bird as a Bluewing with absolute certainty, I have not made the record public until now. The Belmont bird was lost to view after I had had a moment's distinct sight of it, and I could not find it again on that day neither on the next day.



Wright, Horace Winslow. 1909. "A Nesting of the Blue-Winged Warbler in Massachusetts." *The Auk* 26, 337–345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4071267>.

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