



# Minnesota:

## Connecticut Warbler Special

June 11 - 14, 2015

### Trip Report & Species List



Cover Photos: Connecticut Warbler (Steve Bird), Sedge Wren (Michael Carpenter), LeConte's Sparrow (SB), Chestnut-sided Warbler (MC), Sharp-tailed Grouse (SB), Cape May Warbler (Paul Wolter), Group at lunch (MC)



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# MINNESOTA TRIP REPORT

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Leaders: Gina Nichol, Steve Bird & local guide



Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) is one of the most sought after members of the North American wood warbler family. It is a large warbler and is olive above, yellow below with a gray hood and a signature bold white eye ring. Its skulking habits and preference for undergrowth and the remote bogs, alder swamps and upland deciduous woodlands of the boreal forests make it one of the more challenging of its family to get on one's life list.

In the spring, the Connecticut Warbler (Photo: Steve Bird) travels from its wintering grounds in South America through Florida and the Midwest up into central Canada to its breeding grounds in bogs and deciduous forests near fresh water. It nests far from its namesake state in remote areas of northeast Minnesota, northern Michigan, and Wisconsin. In

September, the Connecticut Warbler makes its fall migration on a more easterly track along the Atlantic coast, and this is the only time that it is possible to see it in Connecticut.

Many a birder has spent countless hours chasing Connecticut Warblers so we decided to go to the source where this elusive bird breeds. And so began our Connecticut Warbler quest in Minnesota.

## Day 1 – June 11

Our intrepid group met at the airport in Minneapolis and loaded into the vans that had been used for the Rolling Stones concert a week earlier. After stalling the airport security as we waited for Roger's delayed flight, we set off in the rain heading north out of the city traffic toward Duluth. Though we weren't really birding yet, we couldn't help but notice roadside birds along the way. Wild Turkey, Great Blue Heron, Turkey Vultures American Kestrel, American Crow, Common Raven, American Robin, and Red-winged Blackbird were among the sightings as we travelled.

At the hotel, we met up with our local guide Chris and Marylou and Ellie who had driven in from the Chicago area. We checked in and went to dinner. Not to waste any time, after dinner we headed out to MacGregor Marsh in search of Yellow Rail. It was a gorgeous evening with clear skies and light winds and as the sun set we heard Veery singing from the forests adjacent to the marsh. Nelson's Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats were singing seemingly everywhere but spotting one proved to be a challenge. We stopped and listened at an area where Chris had seen Yellow Rail when he scouted the previous week. We could hear the winnowing of a Wilson's Snipe but no Rail. Night continued to fall and at another stop we could probably three Virginia Rails. Another smaller, fairly unfriendly group of birders were doing the same and ostensibly having similar luck based

on their apparent frustration which was unjustly directed toward us. The Yellow Rails were just not playing tonight. We returned to the hotel for a few hours' sleep in preparation for search for Connecticut Warbler the next day.

## Day 2 – June 12

Sunrise just after 5 AM meant we were up and out early heading for Sax-Zim Bog, a 200 square mile area of bog, upland woods and hayfields in central Minnesota. As we neared the bog, we saw a Sandhill Crane standing in the middle of a field but didn't stop. After all, we were on a mission.

A little further on, turned down a road to check the Sharp-tailed Grouse. We spotted the grouse almost immediately and had good views of up to 6 birds not far from the road. A Brewer's Blackbird was even closer and there were several Bobolinks displaying in the grasses on our left. A singing LeConte's Sparrow was coaxed in practically to our feet and offered the best views most of us had ever had of this species. A male Northern Harrier (gray ghost) flew through hunting over the fields but that didn't seem to deter the birds. A pair of Wood Ducks flew by and disappeared into the trees and as we were trying to get on a Sedge Wren, a pair of Black-billed Cuckoos appeared in some poplar trees in front of us. In fact there were three birds in this grove of poplars and we had great views in the scope of one perched on an open branch.

The birding was great here but we had to tear ourselves away to go for our target bird. We made our way up to another road and drove slowly until we heard the emphatic song of a Connecticut Warbler. We got out and tried to see the bird but it was a few hundred feet off the road in the black spruce forest. So, some of us donned our waterproof boots (or not) and crossed a small ditch into the bog. The forest floor was spongy underfoot with damp moss and gorgeous Lady's slippers and Labrador Tea in bloom. In short order, we located the gorgeous bird singing about 40 feet up in a poplar tree. As we positioned to get the scopes on the bird, Gina went back to get the rest of the group and invited another small group of California birders in to see the bird. It was time to get wet feet!

As we got everyone into position, the bird flew, possibly chasing a female but eventually returned to the original tree and offered pretty good views including great scope views as it continued to sing. We had seen the Connecticut Warbler, a gorgeous male! The smile on John's face said it all. Seeing this bird was a victory for all involved and Roger ticked it as his 7094<sup>th</sup> world species. We took our time and got views from several angles, savouring our triumph.

Warbler watchers. Photo by Pat Linskey.



With the main target under our belt, we continued on, stopping for a pair of Gray Jays. Dragonflies started flying and Chris caught a Four-spotted Skimmer to show us. We cruised slowly along the bog roads and saw a couple of Broad-winged Hawks circling above the trees, a Red-eyed Vireo singing from an open perch, and some Turkey Vultures flying over the farm fields. We stopped to check some Black-billed Magpies and found them to be tending to a noisy chick. Tree, Cliff and Barn Swallows were noted over the field and the song of Mourning Warbler got our attention in the woods on the other side of the road. It took a little coaxing but eventually all got views. Meanwhile, Paul and Maureen saw an adult Bald Eagle flying over the farm field where the Turkey Vultures had been. A Hairy Woodpecker flew over and dragonflies again caught our attention including River Jewelwing and Four-spotted Skimmer. A Canadian Tiger Swallowtail butterfly was seen.

By now it was time for lunch so we made our way to the Wilbert Café where a feisty waitress that took good care of us. Chris celebrated our victory with pie. After lunch we birded along a more open marsh area where Alder Flycatchers were present and perched in the open. We walked a short way and had the best views ever of Clay-colored Sparrow while some Northern Flickers vied for our attention as they worked on a dead snag. We found a Sedge Wren here that turned out to be incredibly showy, turning every which way on its perch as if to be posing for the paparazzi.



Moving on, we crossed a railroad track where Chris got out and picked up a sample of Taconite, a low-grade iron ore along the tracks. Since the high grade iron ore in the nearby mountains was mined, Taconite was now being produced and Chris explained the process. The result was these Taconite pellets that litter the ground around the railroad tracks as they fall from the railroad cars during transport.

We continued along the bog roads picking up Nashville Warbler, Black-capped Chickadee and American Redstart. From the main road, we had three American Bitterns flying over a pond. After a long, successful day, we enjoyed another delicious dinner at Carmin's, our favorite restaurant in Cloquet.

But for some, that wasn't the end of the day. Chris had tempted us with the possibility of "whips and whets" so after dinner some of us piled into the van and headed toward Douglas County, Wisconsin. We passed through Duluth and had our first look at Lake Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes and as usual, Chris educated us interesting facts about it – Superior is the second largest freshwater lake in the world by surface area, the largest lake by volume in North America and the third-largest freshwater lake by volume in the world. Named "gichi-gami" by the Native American Ojibwe communities meaning "great sea", the name morphed into "Gitche Gumee" in Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and Gordon Lightfoot's *Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Crossing the Blatnik Bridge we saw the Common Tern colony on the 8-acre Interstate Island. The island was built in 1934 with the dredge spoils of the Duluth-Superior harbor

and straddles the Minnesota-Wisconsin border. Designated a State Wildlife Management Area in 1979, the island is now managed as critical habitat for Piping Plovers and as a nesting colony for Common Terns. Traveling at 65 mph over the bridge, all we could see was a bird covered island with terns and gulls.

After what seemed like an endless journey, we arrived at our destination. We pulled off into the parking lot and were greeted by a gorgeous evening and the requisite no-see-ums and mosquitos. As the sun set, the sky began to turn pink (Photo: Paul Wolter) and our attention turned to the sound of a drumming Ruffed Grouse not far into the forest. We tried to see it but without crashing into the thick undergrowth we had no chance. That would most certainly flush the bird so we thought better of it and enjoyed the drumming. As we waited, a couple of American Woodcock flew by and some Common Nighthawks chased insects above us. A Barred Owl called in the



distance and a Hooded Merganser flew by and then as darkness fell, the Eastern Whip-poor-wills started calling. There were likely six birds in the area and one was seen as it flew up from its perch on the bridge. One flew in and landed on the ground and then flew back up to the roof of the bathrooms. A few minutes later, we had good views of a Whip-poor-will perched on our side of the bridge. The “whip” part was a success, however our hopes for Saw-whet Owl were dashed.

### Day 3 – June 13

Having been successful with our target Connecticut Warbler we decided to head north to look for some more boreal species. So at dawn we were driving along north shore of Lake Superior enjoying the view of the vast expanse of water. We stopped to look at the lake at Split Rock River where a family of Common Mergansers was very close to shore, the young of which were probably just a few days old. An adult Bald Eagle watched them from its perch but did not go after them for some reason. Looking out over the lake, we saw Double-crested Cormorant and three Red-breasted Mergansers



and when we walked back to the vans, we scoped a male Black-and-white Warbler singing from an exposed perch.

We turned north into Minnesota's Iron Range and entered Lake Superior National Forest, an immense area of nearly 4 million acres of forest and water. We drove into the forest and saw a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers as they flew off. Our target here was Black-backed Woodpecker (Photo: Steve Bird) which we found in an old burn area on the way to Isabella Lake. Other birds here included Alder Flycatcher, another Mourning Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, Downy Woodpecker, and a flock of Cedar Waxwings. We birded several locations along the forest roads and enjoyed great views of a Blackburnian Warbler with a glowing orange throat, Tennessee Warbler, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. As we proceeded, a Merlin flew down the road in front of us and a stop for a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker also yielded Ovenbird and Cape May and Parula Warblers.



We headed for the village of Isabella, on the Laurentian Divide at 2,000 feet above sea level for lunch at the Stony River Café. The café offered sustenance as well as Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (Photo: Paul Wolter) at the feeder in front of the restaurant. In the afternoon, we birded Stony River Forest Road and found Canada Warbler and a cooperative Boreal Chickadee. There were Moose tracks and Wolf scat on the road and some saw a Beaver as we passed a small pond. We worked our way back via Two Harbors and enjoyed another excellent meal at Carmin's. We said goodbye to Marylou and Ellie who were driving home the next day.



#### Day 4 – June 14

On our last morning, we birded a road and found a singing Golden-winged Warbler (Photo: Michael Carpenter) which offered good views. As we traveled, we saw Eastern Bluebirds in the open fields and on the power lines and a perched Broad-winged Hawk being mobbed by an Eastern Kingbird. The second van saw three Sandhill Cranes flying away. At one point, we stopped where a Connecticut Warbler was singing in the forest.



Some slogged into the marsh for another look at the target bird and were successful, if not wet and bug bitten. The others stayed out on the road and saw Blackburnian Warbler, Alder Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Chestnut-sided Warbler. A Dark-eyed Junco was heard but never came into view.



We moved on stopping for a Snapping Turtle in the road and found several Snapping Turtle nests that had been dug up and marauded. In the fog over the adjacent pond there was a Ring-necked Duck. On another lake, we found a Common Loon on a nest and a pair of Trumpeter Swans (one with a yellow neck band that was marked 59E).

Our last stop was Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge. In the Mandy Lake area we had nice views of Least Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, and some close Common Loons. We continued back to Minneapolis and our flights home after a whirlwind weekend in Minnesota. We tallied 19 warbler species (seen and/or heard)

including our target Connecticut Warbler plus some boreal bonuses of Black-backed Woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee. We enjoyed exploring the boreal forest, learned a bit about this part of the world, and made some new friends. Thanks to our local guide Chris for all of his efforts on our behalf. We'll be back this winter!

