

“We’ve been hearing a Whippoorwill where the power lines cross Landrus Road”. Larry Yeager’s phone call not only created an enormous amount of excited anticipation in me for the hearing and/or seeing of this rare summer resident but also started my involvement with Cherry Flats/35C76. This Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (PBBA) area had part of Arnot, a few wetlands, and then, except for the clearing under the power lines, was completely forested. Landrus Road was the only other clearing going through this portion of the Tioga State Forest.

Larry and I agreed that the Whippoorwill was probably surviving off of the insects that proliferated in the open area of this man-made creation. He also said that because of the great amount of milkweed, a couple of butterfly experts had designated this area as one of the premier spots in the state for Lepidopterous. The Whippoorwill prefers large insects, so the natural combination present here seemed to contribute to it’s ‘setting up nest.’

After enjoying the robust song of the Whippoorwill that evening, I showed up in the dense fog early the next morning ready to document each avian species that I saw. Cherry Flats/35C76 would not be an easy block to work because of inaccessibility to the woods and a complete lack of open fields.

As I lamented the probable absence of Bobolinks, Meadowlarks, and Field Sparrows, I was astonished when I saw my first bird of the day! A Double-crested Cormorant, looking very prehistoric, was drying its wings while sitting on the top of a dead tree on a small island in ‘Lake Arnot’. I clicked the shutter and documented this strange sighting. A picture confirms the unusual and the digital camera has elevated this process greatly. I was lucky to snap the first documented sighting of a Black Vulture in Tioga County last winter in Nauvoo as those “black birds” feasted off of Essie Heyd’s offerings in the backyard of their farm.

The PBBA project, sponsored by the Carnegie-Mellon Institute of Pittsburgh, is an attempt to document all the birds within specific geological blocks in order to chart their statewide population disbursements. This five year (2004-2008) initiative is continually seeking public involvement through a volunteer structure, and my primary focus for 2006 was to be a concentration on Cherry Flats/35C76.

The lack of fields in the block was offset by the presence of a number of large wetlands. The first morning’s observations of a Green Heron and a Belted Kingfisher feeding their young, along with the musical trilling of a Swamp Sparrow, helped to allay the nagging of deer flies and mosquitoes. Although Yellowthroats were cropping up everywhere in shrubs bordering the wetlands and woods, this vast forested area contributed to the song of the Red-eyed Vireo being the most repeated identification of the day. If the sun rising represents a kind of monotony, then the vocalization of the Red-eyed Vireo (with one study counting over 15,000 in a 24 hour period) is a member of this natural tedium. Although a birders mettle is tested more by an invasion of European Starlings to a backyard winter feeder, the song of this vireo can similarly push the resilience limit with an over-saturation of the ear/brain connection.

The next week turned up a total of 58 species of birds with a high number of warblers. One warbler sighting, however, on the morning of July 14, not only reaffirmed the

“expect the unexpected” quality of birding, but fell into the rare category of a possible first for the area.

Suddenly I saw a warbler-like movement in the trees before me. My perspective from Landrus Road, since it was cut into the side of a hill, was looking directly into the sub-canopy of trees about 50’-80’ tall. The bird alighted, level with my eyesight in a tree about 30’ away. Its markings immediately suggested that it was a Yellow-throated Warbler (not a Yellowthroat). The plain and simple yellow color starting at the bill and extending to the beginning of the belly, but not on the belly or the vent, along with a strong black eye stripe with prominent white above, brought my identification closer to being positive. This under-yellow was very distinct and did not melt into or with the black striping on the flanks and side. My training of quickly picking out wing bars and the color of the legs and bill (both black) contributed to it being a Yellow-throated. A good 5 second look was followed a few moments later by a 20 second observance of the same bird struggling with a large gangly insect 1/3 of its own length. As a sense of awe at this tussle overcame my strict adherence to picking out other markings, I failed to see a white neck spot that I noticed while looking in the Sibley bird book after the sighting. However the long bill noted on the page was consistent with what I saw. As it adjusted the bug in its bill and flew off with it, I thought that this action may have represented the breeding confirmation of carrying food to young. The distinctness of the bird’s markings set it very much apart from the Prairie, Magnolia, and Pine Warblers that I am familiar with.

If this determination is accepted, it would be, to my knowledge, the most northern Pennsylvania breeding observation of the Yellow-throated Warbler. This type of information is exactly what the PBBA is meant to show; trends among specific species of birds. A few minutes later I was brought back into common bird reality as a deep brilliant crimson Scarlet Tanager landed in front of me and it’s strong “chik-brrrr”-ing let me know to move on.

A week of going back to the same location did not, as I had hoped for, produce another Yellow-throated sighting. However, the sound of another bird, heard many times and not seen, has sent me to bed at night with its song in my head, frustrated as to its identity. Birding “in the slow lane” of Landrus Road is just where I want to be and I am not done with Cherry Flats/35C76. I am compelled, for the good of the PBBA project, to move on to another block next year, but the unfinished birding and oddities of this area will wing my curiosity and data sheet back again.

Birdwatch appears in the Wellsboro Gazette’s ‘Outdoor Section’ the second Wednesday of each month. The Tiadaghton Audubon Society ([www.tiaudubon.org](http://www.tiaudubon.org)) meets the third Wednesday of each month (Sept.-May) at the Gmiener Cultural Center, Wellsboro, Pa. The PBBA is in need of volunteers. Please access the information at [www.pabirdatlas.org](http://www.pabirdatlas.org) or call me at 570-324-2492.