



Field Guides Tour Report

VIRGINIAS' WARBLERS 2014

May 28, 2014 to Jun 1, 2014
John Rowlett, Bret Whitney & Tom Reed

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.

Our tour marked the twenty-third unfolding, over 19 successive years, of "Virginias' Warblers." As I mentioned to some of you, its inauspicious forerunner, a four-day "Durbin, WV, Weekend," I'd named after an entry in Olin Sewall Pettingill's GUIDE TO BIRD FINDING EAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI. Despite the exciting entry by Pettingill, and some great mountain-and-valley birding, the trip limped along until I realized that it was simply poorly conceived. Nobody had ever heard of Durbin, WV, except for a few folks in Pocahontas County, devoted followers of Sewall Pettingill, and those whose notice had been captured by "downtown" Durbin's speed trap. Everyone had heard of warblers, of the Virginias, of a Virginia's Warbler. Since the name change, this tour has lived up to its billing, and once again we took great pleasure in more than two dozen breeding North American warblers (a generous collection in such small compass, including some of the most beautiful in the entire family), embellished with a sonorous group of brown-backed thrushes, with studies of four closely related Empidonax flycatchers, a dazzling array of some of the most extraordinary breeders in North America--Bobolink, Red-headed Woodpecker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole--and a full house of gracious hosts who people the land.

The New World Warblers are currently treated as constituting one family, though this group's proximity to other groups in its closely related assemblage of oscine passerines, especially the tanagers, is still unsettled. The warblers we saw are evolving so rapidly that it remains difficult to assign some species with any reliability to one genus, and some of the species wind up being sorted one way, then another. I have noted in the annotations where recent changes have taken place among the genera, and I've tried to indicate where most of the species we saw spend their winters, since these warblers are "Virginias' Warblers" only as breeders, and since preserving migration routes and winter habitat in the Neotropics is as important as preserving habitat selected for nesting. It is remarkable that, of the 26 species of warblers we found, no fewer than 10 genera are represented, even though these species are such closely related members of their group that hybrids are not uncommon, even intergeneric hybrids. Most of the temperate-breeding warblers we saw are sexually dimorphic, whereas the Neotropical-breeding warblers look more or less alike. In the triplist that follows I've noted a few particular aspects of the biology of each species, some of which we remarked on during the tour. In order to see well all the warblers we did--indeed that was ALL of them save for that pesky Northern Waterthrush--some playback of their songs was necessary. Yet they will not hear playback for another year, and all those who responded to playback this year were victorious, as we left them in full possession of their territories and with a keen sense of achievement, no doubt!

It was a pleasure to welcome Bret back as a co-leader, after an eleven-year absence from the tour, and to introduce Tom to the sister states, along on his first. I thank both of them for their informed and skillful collaboration. I'm also grateful to Abbie for her behind-the-scenes labor and tasty preparations, to Wayne, Pen, Patti, John and Nancy, and Margaret and Wayne for hosting meals and sharing their bounty of Highland County wealth. John Spahr even put us onto some juvenile screech-owls that he had discovered earlier that morn.

Greatest gratitude goes to all of you, whose interest in warblers enabled this tour to fly. There are well over 100 species of New World Warblers, and you've now seen almost a quarter of them on this tour alone. Bret and I would love to take you anywhere in the Neotropics to show you more!

John

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – We kept seeing the same pair with goslings at a pond in the Blue Grass Valley. [N]

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*) – Our first one was on day one along the James River; then a pair later on the third day.



A breathtaking Blackburnian Warbler, by guide Bret Whitney

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – A pair surprised us along the Blue Ridge Parkway on our second day.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*) – Daily.

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – Also daily.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*) – One flew over [the cuckoo's nest] along the James (there were enough cuckoos around to be nesting, for sure).

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (*Buteo lineatus*) – Several scattered through the region, including an immature I too quickly called a young Red-tailed (based partly on habitat, partly on what were illusory hood and belly steaks) that revealed its ID clearly when viewed in the video Bret made. Some of you may have correctly identified it without the video and were too polite to straighten me out.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK (*Buteo platypterus*) – One heard along the Blue Ridge and one seen circling over the Swamp Sparrow swamp in WV.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Several throughout.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – Someone mentioned having seen one on our last morning, but most were heard only. [*]

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Daily. [I]

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – Daily, including several males doing courtship flights over their respective territories.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO (*Coccyzus americanus*) – Seen on several days, yet most common along the James River where we had nice views of some vocalizing birds.

Strigidae (Owls)

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL (*Megascops asio*) – Wow! A real highlight seeing those three fledged juves and one of the two adults in the Blue Grass Valley our last morning, thanks to John Spahr who had found them earlier in the day on his owl census. [N]

BARRED OWL (*Strix varia*) – Heard only, though we usually see them on the tour; how did they resist showing in response to Bret's imitation? [*]

Apodidae (Swifts)

CHIMNEY SWIFT (*Chaetura pelagica*) – Fairly common across the region.

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus colubris*) – Seen here and there, perhaps best at Margaret's.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – Several seen, first along the James.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) – Now that was a surprise! Tom spotted a bird on the fence post in Fluvanna County as we were on our way to the confluence of the Hardware and the James. We stopped to find at least three adults holding territory in the area. What a most spectacular bird, one that is under serious threat throughout its range!

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – Regular at lower elevations throughout our route.

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – Some nice looks at breeders in the hardwood zone mostly above 3200 feet. Our closest looks came of a pair attracted to the screech-owl imitation at Wayne's farm. They are real suckers for owl vocalizations as well as sap!

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – Several nice looks at scattered individuals.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – Seen and heard, first near the James, then on into the Blue Ridge and the mountains of both sister states.

NORTHERN FLICKER (YELLOW-SHAFTED) (*Colaptes auratus auratus*) – Here and there, mainly in the Blue Grass Valley.

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – Enjoyed mostly in the James River bottoms and in the Blue Ridge; our first sighting was of a responsive pair along the James, the male of which flew in raising its flaming red crest high to the skies!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – At least three were seen in the Blue Grass Valley where they seem a bit more numerous this year than in the recent past.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus virens*) – Seen and heard on several occasions, first in the James River bottoms, then scattered throughout in areas below about 3200 feet.

ACADIAN FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax virescens*) – Heard each day (but for our last morning), and finally seen nicely at our breakfast spot on Old House Run. This long-winged Empid is the only trans-Gulf migrant in its genus.

ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax alnorum*) – One of four species of *Empidonax* that we saw and looked over carefully on the tour; hearing them while observing them is the best way to sort out these notoriously difficult look-alikes. The present species and Willow are both found in willows in Highland and Pocahontas counties, with Alder favoring areas above 3000 feet, Willow below 3000.

WILLOW FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax traillii*) – Great scope study of a bird along the Greenbrier River, Pocahontas County, WV. Its energetic and repeated vocalization--"fitz-bew"--was noted by all.

LEAST FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax minimus*) – Seen and heard nicely, this small Empid has a very short primary extension and a noticeable, white eye-ring. Accordingly, its migration south is far shorter than its three congeners.

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*) – Seen daily. [N]

GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus crinitus*) – Seen well at our Humpback Rocks picnic area.

EASTERN KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) – Not as common this year as in most.

Vireonidae (Vireos)

YELLOW-THROATED VIREO (*Vireo flavifrons*) – Fine looks at this big vireo in Fluvanna County where we saw the Red-headed Woodpeckers.

BLUE-HEADED VIREO (*Vireo solitarius*) – A pretty vireo, enjoyed on several occasions in the mountainous areas from the Blue Ridge to the virgin spruce of West Virginia.

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*) – The commonest vireo on our route; seen from the James River bottoms to the mixed spruce-hardwood forests of West Virginia.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Daily in small numbers.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Also daily.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Seen daily, one on the roof of the Holiday Inn in Charlottesville by some!

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – Along the James and in the Blue Grass Valley.

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Seen mostly west of the Blue Ridge on our trip.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Our commonest swallow on the tour; we could see nests of this species in Margaret's barn, alongside (old?) nests of Cliff Swallow. [N]

CLIFF SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) – A couple seen from the vans as we drove through the Blue Grass Valley.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*) – Seen along the James and in the Blue Ridge. [N]

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – Seen in the mountainous areas west of the Blue Ridge.

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – Seen along the James and in the Blue Ridge.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – Several good looks, perhaps best at Wayne's farm as a responsive bird flew in low overhead.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*) – Seen nicely in Fluvanna County and in the Blue Ridge.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – Great study of this cool little guy demonstrating how camouflaged it is when scaling a spruce with loose bark!

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*) – Seen best at Margaret's farm.

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes hiemalis*) – A couple were heard repeatedly on Gaudineer Knob, though they did not respond to playback by showing. What a remarkable, complex song!

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Seen in Fluvanna County and at least heard in the Blue Ridge.

Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*) – Seen in Fluvanna County and along the James; heard in the Blue Ridge.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – What a regal display of a feisty bird, his crown erect, at the Science Camp on FR14, WV.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EASTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia sialis*) – Seen at lower elevations throughout.

VEERY (*Catharus fuscescens*) – Great looks at a bird at the Science Camp, WV, reminding us that it has one of the finest of thrush songs.

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – Seen very well at our stop in the virgin spruce grove, Pocahontas County, WV. What a lovely song, what a distinctive "drip" call note.

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*) – One confiding bird seen well at the gate of Wayne's farm as we entered the property.

WOOD THRUSH (*Hylocichla mustelina*) – Fine looks at a bird hopping about the ground among the buildings at the Science Camp, WV.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Widespread throughout except in the highest elevations. Several nests were spotted, the first at the Science Camp. [N]

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – A personal favorite, this cheerful Mimid was seen at lower elevations from the James to the Potomac.

BROWN THRASHER (*Toxostoma rufum*) – Quite common in the Blue Grass Valley where we saw them repeatedly, if often from the vans.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Seen in Albemarle and Fluvanna counties and in the Blue Ridge area.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – About. [I]

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) – Seen daily, often in pairs by this date, but this late breeder was also still flocking.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

OVENBIRD (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) – What a remarkable performance by that male at our Humpback Rocks breakfast spot! Normally a ground dweller, both feeding and nesting there, males on territory will sing high above ground, characteristically strutting along the horizontal limbs as they deliver their loud, repetitive song, often rendered "teacher, teacher, teacher," for all in the woods to hear. We heard them first in Fluvanna County and often in the Blue Ridge as we drove the parkway. Little known is the habit of delivering a more complex flight song, often after dark.

WORM-EATING WARBLER (*Helmitheros vermivorum*) – Seen well along the Blue Ridge where we heard their tightly wound trill and noted their lovely plumage in rich buff. Although these members of a monotypic genus no doubt occasionally take caterpillars ("worms"), especially during the breeding season, they characteristically eat spiders and arthropods that hide in dead leaf clusters, often dislodging them as they bang on the leaves with their beak or, if necessary, following the cluster all the way to the ground to pry it open. These ground-nesters prefer hillsides and slopes for breeding.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia motacilla*) – We finally got good looks at this lovely songster along Old House Run; reckless streams like this one provide ideal habitat for this big, big-billed warbler which nests in pocks and behind roots along the vertical stream banks. Note that the two waterthrushes have been removed from *Seiurus*, the Ovenbird genus, and placed in a newly erected genus. *Seiurus* is thought to be basal in relation to other warblers, whereas *Parkesia* has been found to be more distant.

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) – This warbler has an extremely broad breeding range over boreal North America and favors still rather than running water. We heard two singing on territory in the rhodos choking Blister Swamp, Randolph County, near the southern limit of its nesting range, but neither would respond to playback by showing. It happens! But what a beautiful place. [*]

GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) – What a thrill to see and to hear this handsome warbler in its fine Highland successional habitat on the O'Bryan's farm in the upper Blue Grass Valley. Dense blackberry briars interrupted with scattered small trees make perfect cover for nesting and for singing and gleaning. This warbler nests on or close to the ground and completes nest building in a mere five or six days. One of the tour's concluding highlights took place across the highway from Margaret's when a territorial male appeared--singularly!--atop a nearby bush at eye level for a few precious moments--a staggering tableau.

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*) – Dapper looking males of this monotypic genus were seen in Fluvanna County where we noted their peculiar form of locomotion on tree trunks and limbs. Its high, squeaky song was heard on a number of occasions during our Blue Ridge morn. Though "*Mniotilta*" refers to the bird's plucking moss, it evidently uses little, if any, moss in the construction of its terrestrial nest, so the name probably refers to the bird's probing of "mossy" bark for insects.

PROTHONOTARY WARBLER (*Protonotaria citrea*) – The "Golden Swamp Warbler" shone for us along the James, where it delivered its "sweet-sweet-sweet" among the giant willows and sycamores. Representative of another monotypic genus, this warbler, but one of two Parulids to do so, selects a (often dead) tree cavity for its nest. It is this behavior which prompted Aldo Leopold to note that the swamp jewel exemplifies how "dead trees are transmuted into living animals." We were reminded by someone on the tour of this warbler's famous role in Whittaker Chambers's attempt to prove his friendship with Alger Hiss before the Nixon subcommittee of the House UAAC (1948). Its common epithet derives from the golden robes worn by priests of the Catholic Church's protonotarii.

MOURNING WARBLER (*Geothlypis philadelphia*) – What a treat! After first watching this formally dressed warbler (now placed in the Yellowthroat genus) circle us, permitting but quick glimpses, we found a bolder bird insistent on sitting out on a bare limb high above to defend its territory in rich song to our collective heart's content. This and the flaming Blackburnian were voted tour favorites--prior to our Golden-winged morning!

KENTUCKY WARBLER (*Geothlypis formosa*) – Yes! This beauty, which had given us trouble last year, sat up for all to enjoy along the Blue Ridge our first morning. Do black "sideburns" provoke a more fitting translation of its specific epithet as handsome rather than beautiful? Or does the epithet call into question the use of "sideburns"? You decide.

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Though we had heard this warbler earlier on the tour, nice looks came along FR14 at our swampy Alder Flycatcher spot, where a very responsive male performed a variety of calls in (successful) effort to shut up the presumed interloper.

HOODED WARBLER (*Setophaga citrina*) – Yet another beautiful warbler, the Hooded is now placed in the much-expanded genus *Setophaga* and is considered only quite distantly related to Wilson's (*Wilsonia*) with which it had been placed originally. We had good looks along the Parkway, noting the bold yellow face set off in black hood and the white in the tail.

AMERICAN REDSTART (*Setophaga ruticilla*) – Based on ubiquity of song, this boldly patterned warbler is likely the commonest breeding Parulid along the parts of the Blue Ridge we birded. The genus *Setophaga* was greatly expanded recently to include all members of the genus *Dendroica* because when *ruticilla* was merged in *Dendroica*, *Setophaga*, turns out, had nomenclatural priority, resulting in the *Dendroica*s becoming *Setophaga*s! "Start" is an old English word for tail, and since the American Redstart reminded Linnaeus of the Common Redstart because of red in the tail of these small birds, the common name was used for the unrelated form. "*Setophaga*," or moth-eater, surely a less accurate moniker than the wonderfully descriptive "*Dendroica*," or tree-dweller--an instance when the "correct" name is less adequate than the now obsolete one. In an ironic twist, other "redstarts" belonging to the warbler family (yet treated in different genera) have white rather than red in their tails, resulting in authors of Neotropical guides renaming these warblers "whitestarts."

CERULEAN WARBLER (*Setophaga cerulea*) – Another highlight--what a celestial warbler! This little, short-tailed *Setophaga* (that's hard to get used to) winters on the subtropical east slope of the Andes and breeds in the eastern US, though its numbers are in marked decline. Yet it does well as a breeder in the Blue Ridge, where we had lovely views of the several males singing in front of us. Its very shallow nest, unusual for a warbler, is placed high on a horizontal limb, often 30-60 feet up.

NORTHERN PARULA (*Setophaga americana*) – Splendid encounter at the Science Camp, FR14; that male gave us repeated views at the bridge as it sang in response to playback. Formerly a member of the genus *Parula* (the diminutive of *Parus*, the tit genus in which Linnaeus originally placed this species and from which its common name is derived, along with the wood-warbler family name *Parulidae*), this very small warbler has now been merged into *Setophaga* as well! This *Setophaga* is well known for building its pendant nest in moss, often *Usnea*, at almost any height; in areas where moss is unavailable, the nest is perhaps the most varied structure in the entire family.

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*) – As Ned Brinkley writes, "one might spend a long time looking for a Magnolia Warbler in a magnolia tree"; indeed, almost as long as one might spend looking for a Virginia's Warbler in Virginia! One of the flashiest of the Parulids, *Magnolia* nests at the higher elevations we visited, preferring dark spruce and hemlock forests to the light-infested hardwoods. We had classic views of this bird at Gaudineer Knob and at Wayne's farm.

BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER (*Setophaga fusca*) – One of the top vote getters for favorites of the tour, a Blackburnian aflame in the conifers is hot!

Eighteenth-century Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant was responsible for the common name commemorating Anna and Ashton Blackburne, a sister-brother team of British naturalists: Anna curated a museum near Warrington, her brother collected for her in New England. As fate would have it, the German naturalist Statius Muller had already described the warbler, having preceded by a few years Pennant's description based on a wintering specimen from French Guiana. So his scientific binomial, *fusca*, replaced *blackburniae*, yet the English epithet honoring the Blackburnes stuck. Curiously "*fusca*"--black or blackish--also was used for "dusky orange," perhaps the color of a Blackburnian's throat in basic plumage while wintering in French Guiana. The nest, placed high in a conifer, is one of the most difficult warbler nests to find, the finale of its wheezy ascending trill one of the most demanding vocalizations to hear. Blackburnians winter on the east slope of the Andes and are abundant visitors at Cabanas San Isidro, Ecuador, where males can be enjoyed singing among peppershrikes and Barred Becards well before heading north.

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – Fairly common in the riparian areas of Highland County and along the Greenbrier in Pocahontas County, where we had fine studies of a male at the Willow Flycatcher spot. We observed reddish chest streaks, source of the binomial "*petechia*," on the adult male and yellow spots in the tail, sole member of its obsolete genus to display this feature. This warbler of rather open country places its nest in the vertical fork of a bush or small tree. A frequent victim of Brown-headed Cowbird brood parasitism, it has developed the defense of building over the defiled clutch, then laying a fresh set of eggs, a cycle which is often repeated: documentation of this behavior exists that shows as many as six stories of nests upon nests.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER (*Setophaga pensylvanica*) – A surprisingly handsome warbler when closely observed, the vibrant yellow cap and wingbars always more striking in person than in the bird's visual representation in guides. An inhabitant of early successional second-growth, this warbler was much less common when the East was more covered with primary forest--Aububon saw only one! Birds place their nests in dense blackberry, or other briar, tangles, like those we witnessed at Margaret O'Bryan's farm. With drooped wings and lifted tail this understory warbler searches the underside of leaves for insects. The peculiar shade of green worn by the immatures in fall is unique within the family, rare within the class. It winters in Middle America, some reach northern South America.

BLACKPOLL WARBLER (*Setophaga striata*) – The only non-breeding wood-warbler recorded on the tour. Although a vigorous Blackpoll sang for 10 minutes outside our room at the Montvallee in Monterey, 5:30 was just too early to wake up participants, so Bret and I were the only ones to note it. A search later around meeting time that morning failed to reveal any continued presence. Blackpoll, a long-distance migrant that winters on Amazonian islands, is the only transient we sometimes see on the tour since it's such a late migrant to the far North where it breeds to tree line across North America. All other warblers are breeding in the areas we visit. [b]

BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER (*Setophaga caerulescens cairnsi*) – Males of this species present a lovely pattern in deep blue, black, and white. More dimorphic than most of its relatives, females of the species are predominantly drab olive with subtle features to distinguish them. Neither sex shows much age differentiation. Our best inspections of a male came at the virgin spruce grove where we noted the black streaks on the back of this subspecies, *cairnsi*, which breeds solely in the Appalachians. Black-throated Blues prefer a shady understory where they place the nest low in rhododendrons, laurels, or small spruces, the female (with some help from the male) building the nest often in as few as four days. We enjoyed hearing the husky, lazy buzz of a song in several areas. This species winters predominantly in the West Indies, though the exact wintering range of *cairnsi* needs more study.

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – This large warbler--well seen, after considerable effort, in a drizzle of "lost pines" along the Blue Ridge--nests almost exclusively in pines (usually hidden on horizontal limbs at well over 30 feet), though it winters in mixed forests or hardwood without pines. We all noted how similar its song is to that of the drier, more mechanical Chipping Sparrow. We heard Pine vocalizing in Fluvanna County where we saw our Prairie Warbler, but these very early breeders were not responding well to playback.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – A lovely warbler, we all agreed, especially on the breeding grounds! We had superb looks at a few males on Gaudineer Knob (outside the communal toilet) and heard their soft, disjointed warble. As a species, Myrtle has been nesting on Gaudineer, at the Goodall farm, and in nearby vicinities for no more than about 30 years now, unless I am mistaken; this is the southern limit of its nesting range. No long distance migrant, Myrtle is rare as far south as Panama. Due to its ability to ingest berries and certain bird-feeder handouts in the winter, it is the sole eastern warbler that has at least some representatives of the species remain through the winter as far north as mid-Atlantic.

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (YELLOW-LORED) (*Setophaga dominica dominica*) – In the Piedmont this long-billed warbler is a lover of large, riparian sycamores during the breeding season, vacationing in Caribbean palms during the winter (the scientific epithet refers to the island of Hispaniola). We finally achieved some good views at the Hardware-James confluence where it was no doubt feeding young, based on its reluctance to respond to playback. The white-lored taxon, formerly referred to as "Sycamore Warbler" (equally apt for the Piedmont birds), interbreeds on occasion with Northern Parula, producing a hybrid that was once described as a separate species and given the name "Sutton's Warbler" in honor of the renowned ornithologist George M. Sutton.

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Setophaga discolor*) – What a performance by this beauty! No "prairie" warbler, *S. discolor* is partial to overgrown fields and brushy clearings in the Piedmont, where it is predictably encountered in low pines or a mix of early succession pines and low bushes. The male is known to mate with several females, charming them with "butterfly" displays. This wag will also wag its tail, as we noted. The nest, built by the female, is placed off the ground up to above eye level. You know you're seeing this warbler well when you're looking down on the rufous streaks on its back! Almost as endearing as its plumage is its song, made up of measured and ascending buzzy phrases, ending in a tightly compressed trill. Due to its easily scrutinized habitat, Prairie is often parasitized by cowbirds.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*) – Phylogenetically speaking, the final member of the genus *Setophaga* (by far the largest genus in the Parulid family) and the eastern exemplar of the black-throated, yellow-faced superspecies. Someone mentioned that the pattern of this warbler's advertising song was the easiest returnee for her to recall from year to year: "zoo zee zoo zoo zee," the "zee" higher pitched. We enjoyed territorial males and a female at Old House Run. *Virens* builds a deep cup which it situates on an outer branch of a conifer or hardwood at almost any height up to 80 feet.

CANADA WARBLER (*Cardellina canadensis*) – Now placed (along with Wilson's Warbler) in the Red-faced Warbler genus, this distinctive Parulid was a joy to observe in the Blue Ridge, where we had at least two males singing their patternless jumble of hurried sweet notes. We also enjoyed another in the swampy rhododendron thickets in Randolph County, WV, the more common of two quite distinct habitat types in the Appalachians. Canadas often cock their long, entirely dark tail. Nesting takes place on or near the ground. Long-distance migrants, they winter on Andean slopes of northwestern South America, where to a pre-spring birder that striking black necklace against a rich yellow breast speaks of the intensity of a not-too-distant return.

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT (EASTERN) (*Icteria virens virens*) – The strange, disjointed series of whistles, toots, and harsh fussings are what alerted us to this comical warbler, if that is what it be called. In response to playback it approached to give us great close views in the pines beside the road. The rich yellow below (oranger in the eastern, nominate taxon) is as much responsible for the generic name *Icteria* ("yellow") as is the allusion

to Icterids, or New World blackbirds (named with the orioles in mind). Is this an accidental irony? Whether or not classified as a Parulid, this is one of the jolliest birds across North America. And at night, the thing becomes downright magical, its pumping flight song delivered ethereally against a waxing moon.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

- EASTERN TOWHEE** (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) – Enjoyed daily, but seen perhaps best in the Blue Ridge at a Shenandoah overlook where we got a red-eyed view coupled with a tea-drinking song.
- CHIPPING SPARROW** (*Spizella passerina*) – Daily, often along the roadsides. We noted the similarity of its song to Pine Warbler and the remarkable similarity to the carolinensis taxon of Dark-eyed Junco.
- FIELD SPARROW** (*Spizella pusilla*) – We had some nice looks at birds singing atop the briar patch at Margaret's. Always a welcome song.
- SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – This grassland sparrow was sitting on the fence wires at the Bobolink spot, where we got nice views of several birds.
- SONG SPARROW** (*Melospiza melodia*) – Heard daily and seen nicely along the Greenbrier at the Willow Flycatcher spot.
- SWAMP SPARROW** (*Melospiza georgiana*) – Great studies of at least one responsive male at the swamp along FR17. This species is very local along our route, so discriminating views of its well-marked features are always appreciated.
- DARK-EYED JUNCO (SLATE-COLORED)** (*Junco hyemalis carolinensis*) – Seen on several days, carolinensis is the large, gray-billed Allegheny subspecies. Seen first at our Humpback Rocks picnic area and heard on numerous occasions. Now was that a junco or a Chipping Sparrow?

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

- SCARLET TANAGER** (*Piranga olivacea*) – Several beauties seen and several heard singing in the Blue Ridge. Oddly, we heard far fewer this year along our route than on any previous tour. Feeding young a bit earlier than usual?
- NORTHERN CARDINAL** (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – The state bird of six states, including both VA and WV. Noted the first two days of the tour.
- ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK** (*Phœnicurus ludovicianus*) – Always an invigorating sight, this handsome Cardinalid possesses a song as rich as his gaudy plumage. We had nice encounters with a couple of males along the Parkway, as well as a view of the modestly plumed female.
- INDIGO BUNTING** (*Passerina cyanea*) – A daily treat, Indigo Bunting is perhaps the most abundant Neotropical migrant along our route, certainly below 3500 feet.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

- BOBOLINK** (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) – One of the great birds of North America--and South America, since it winters in the Pampas! A long-distance migrant, the "ricebird" has been persecuted for its fondness for rice and other grains by farmers in the American South and along its migratory route. The males we saw in the Blue Grass Valley performed brilliantly their bubbling song flights to the great pleasure of all. We noted that the black underparts, white and golden upperparts of Bobolink make it the only species in North America to reverse the typical plumage pattern of dark above, light below.
- RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – A common beauty on our route. A pair was nesting behind the Montvallee, and the female could be seen at the nest from one of the second-floor rooms! [N]
- EASTERN MEADOWLARK** (*Sturnella magna*) – Seen in the grasslands daily and in fair numbers. Commonest in the Blue Grass Valley.
- COMMON GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – Also seen daily in fair numbers.
- BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus ater*) – Encountered daily.
- ORCHARD ORIOLE** (*Icterus spurius*) – Nice looks at a beautiful, dark male; this species delivers one of the richest songs of its genus.
- BALTIMORE ORIOLE** (*Icterus galbula*) – Alarmingly beautiful! So it seems, especially so in Highland County.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

- HOUSE FINCH** (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – These birds were on territory locally in Highland County, including at the Montvallee in Monterey.
- PURPLE FINCH** (*Haemorhous purpureus*) – Heard only, in Pocahontas County along FR14 and in Randolph County in Blister Swamp. [*]
- AMERICAN GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus tristis*) – Not uncommon; seen often flying from the fence or from a composite stalk; heard frequently overhead.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

- HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) – Every now and then. [I]

MAMMALS

- MARSH RABBIT** (*Sylvilagus palustris*) – What a surprise seeing this rabbit at our motel in Monterey! Later that morning we saw another at Margaret's. This rather dark rabbit is larger than a cottontail, with dark tail and larger ears. Also known as Swamp Rabbit.
- EASTERN COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) – Seen in the Blue Grass Valley our last morning.
- PLAIN EASTERN CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias striatus*) – The commonest mammal on the tour.
- WOODCHUCK** (*Marmota monax*) – Seen on several occasions, mostly from the vans as they fed along the highway margins.
- EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Widespread except for the Blue Grass Valley.
- FOX SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus niger*) – The commonest squirrel in the Blue Grass Valley.
- RED SQUIRREL** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – Seen and heard along FR14, at the virgin spruce grove, and in Blister Swamp.
- WOODLAND JUMPING MOUSE** (*Napaeozapus insignis*) – One seen by Bret only.
- NORTHERN RACCOON** (*Procyon lotor*) – One seeing across the James our first afternoon; also seen on our fourth day.
- WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Seen in Fluvanna and Highland counties.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 115 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa