

BLAST from the PAST

Cape May Warbler, Paisley, June 1977

by Iain McDonald & Tom Byars



Plates 94. Cape May Warbler, Paisley, June 1977 (T. Byars) previously unpublished.

I suppose most birders dream about finding a first for Britain and many must wonder if that day will ever happen to them? For a few, that dream became a reality on the 17th June 1977. Most of our friends have asked, what was it like to have discovered a first for the Western Palearctic?

Tom - At the time I was extremely blasé about the whole thing – only later on did the enormity of the moment eventually sink in and that we had observed an amazing event in ornithological history. I think for many twitchers, this bird really did epitomise the whole rarity ethos. With its chance discovery, stunning plumage, detailed observation, controlled panic and final relief, this encounter had all the hallmarks that any birder could ever wish for.

When unsuspecting birding colleagues ask in casual conversation as to what rarities I have encountered during my time, the very mention of *Dendroica tigrina* brings out (a stunned silence, coupled with a few slack jaws!) the most amazing range of facial expressions possible! When birding in the Scillies during the autumn of 1978, this particular story kept me in free beer for my entire stay. Fellow birders were very keen to hear the unfolding chain of events. When asked by *Birding Scotland* to give a rendition for 'Blast from the Past' – hell, why not, it's not every day you chance to discover a Cape May Warbler!

Iain - I would agree with Tom that the enormity of the event did not hit us until afterwards and indeed even today, when people find out we are from Paisley, they will still stop and ask us if we had seen the Cape May Warbler, and its not hard to feel a bit smug when you see the envious expression on their faces . It was a unique event which we will probably never match again.

On the morning of 17th June 1977, we decided on Toms suggestion to go birding that afternoon at Glenfield Country Park, to search for breeding warblers such as Blackcap etc. At the south end of Paisley there is a rather ornamental area of parkland at the foot of Gleniffer Braes, but it does have some interesting habitat on the southern boundary and it was there that we were walking that Friday afternoon. The day was perfect, sunny with light scattered cloud and not a breath of wind, as we set off along the wooded boundary path at around 13:00 hrs. We were having quite an animated discussion about science fiction (the possibility of star drives to be exact!) when a quiet but whispery, repetitive song began to percolate into Tom's subconscious.

Tom - I stopped walking, and asked Iain to "stop talking for a minute" and I concentrated hard. This was novel, for the first time in my hobby, I couldn't identify the singer? Intrigued and mystified, I just had to rectify this little challenge and so I quickly scrambled up a steep grassy slope to draw almost level with a group of conifer trees.

Iain - When Tom motioned for me to be quiet I thought what's up I didn't hear anything. He turned to me and said can you hear that, what the **** that! I replied that I could, and that it wasn't anything I recognised. The call was definitely not familiar.

Tom - The bird appeared hidden amongst the upper branches of a spruce, so using my 16x50 binoculars, I took a quick look at the canopy. There, perched right out on the top-most spray, was the most exotic looking warbler I had ever seen. It was a complete riot of colour and pattern, black tiger stripes on bright yellow underparts, so vivid against the green foliage and blue sky. Chestnut cheek patches, streaked greenish mantle and a dark cap. I tried to draw breath as my legs just buckled beneath me and my stomach felt as if it had been on a roller coaster ride. A rush of adrenaline must have kicked in with the sudden, utter realisation of it all, as my hands started to shake uncontrollably. Trembling on my knees with stomach churning in nauseous spasms, I shouted, "Why me" to no-one in particular. Judging by his facial expression Iain must have started to worry about my animated display, for he shouted up to me, "What is it?" I then dropped the bombshell, "It's an American wood warbler!", I replied.

Iain - When Tom said he had just seen an American wood warbler, I admit I was a little sceptical. The possibility of an escaped cage bird crossed my mind. I thought what's the probability of an American wood warbler being found in the middle of a rural park particularly in Paisley, hardly the sort of place you would expect to find one. We usually associate this family with the south-west of England, Shetland, the Isles of Scilly etc.

Tom - I was fairly confident that it was an American wood warbler, but the big question was – which one? Well, Black-and-White along with Blackpoll were definitely out, as was Parula, Myrtle and Yellow. Now what did Black-throated Green look like? The thought about having a new species for Britain came into mind, as did the fact that I had no pen or paper on me. A sudden wave of panic then set in - what if it flew off? Who would believe me? Did I have a film in my camera back home! I knew I had to get a grip of myself and bloody well calm down and figure out the best way to tackle the problem. The bird appeared quite settled, singing and feeding away in a small area of Scots Pine, Norway Spruce and Rowan. I was convinced that this bird was actually holding territory!

Iain - Tom by this time was getting more agitated and I thought this must really be something special. He shouted down to me to get up there right away as he couldn't quite believe what he was looking at. He directed me to the top of one of the conifers and asked me if I could see the bird he had been looking at. I eventually located it after a few anxious moments. I commented to Tom that it was obviously a sort of warbler, but it wasn't one out of any of the European field guides. Tom was convinced by this time that it was a North American wood warbler. Who was I to argue! The first thing that I noticed was that it had extremely bright colourful plumage, so clearly it was a summer male. The breast and flanks were a bright yellow with bold black streaking. The upper parts were greenish with streaking on the mantle, a black crown, yellow supercillium and chestnut ear coverts. All this combined to give an impression of a stunning male warbler which had left both of us momentarily speechless. The enormity of what we had found then hit us, what we were looking at, was potentially a first for Britain. We realised if we wanted to get the bird accepted we were going to have to provide lots of documentary evidence.

Tom - I asked Iain if he would run to down to the park rangers office and tell them to get up here A.S.A.P. and to bring back some paper and pens. As Iain headed off back down the slope, a thought came to mind. A birdwatching friend of mine, told me an amazing story of how he was surrounded by passerines whilst ringing at Point Pelee in Ontario. He had enticed them down by 'pishing', so I gave it a try. Before I could finish off the final syllable, the warbler had flitted down and perched itself two foot away from my stunned face. I lowered my binoculars as the bird cocked it's head inquisitively to one side and looked straight at me – the plumage looked even better! By the time Iain came back with pen and paper, along with two bemused looking park rangers, a group of excitable school kids and a sheepdog! I was desperate to run the two miles home and grab my photographic gear and tape recorder. After what seemed like 30 minutes of cross country and half marathon, about one and a half miles, I eventually made it back home. My mother couldn't make any sense out of me at all. I tried to communicate events from the past hour into four seconds, while rushing past her to fetch my equipment. It all sounded too gibberish, she later told me – although she did make out "rare bird" in my ramble.

Iain - I watched the bird with Tom for half an hour, then Tom went home to fetch his photographic equipment and a tape recorder. About 15 minutes after he left however, I lost sight of the bird and as the bird had stopped singing I was unable to relocate it. The rest of the group (not being birders) started to lose interest and began to drift away. At this point, about an hour after he had left, Tom arrived back. "Have you still got it?" Tom asked me anxiously and I replied that I had lost it shortly after he had left.

Tom - Fortunately, my father drove me back to the park which saved precious time, only to find that the park rangers and entourage were heading off! "Why are they leaving", I asked Iain. "It vanished shortly after you left", he replied. I knew it had to be around still, so I asked the group to stay put, and sure enough, minutes later I heard the distinct nasal 'swee-swee-swee' notes coming from the conifer canopy.

The following hour was quite frantic, with field descriptions taken, taping the song (with me pishing away in the background!) and worst of all – trying to photograph the little bugger. My hands never stopped shaking, sweat was stinging my eyes, horse flies were biting me and then of course, it eventually clouded over! Still, the relief was immense, knowing that the evidence required for the rarities committee had been well and truly obtained! Now for the next stage, letting the news out.

Iain - We watched the bird until around 16:00 hrs. When Tom arrived home he contacted Hector Galbraith a local birder at the time and explained to him what we had found. He planned to return with him as quickly as possible in the evening.

Tom - My mother had other plans however! "You will eat your tea first, rare bird or not, you will wait here until you've eaten something before you start phoning anyone!" My tea was finished in record time, but it was hard keeping it down as I dialled the first number and spoke to Hector Galbraith. "Hello Hector, this is Tom here, I've just seen an American wood warbler at Glenfield Park this afternoon!" There was a small pause and then Hector replied, "Are you sure it isn't a Siskin?" I was very persistent however, "It's definitely an American wood warbler, but I don't know which species it is, as I haven't got an American field guide!" "I'll be right over", replied Hector and true to his word, he very nearly knocked me down in his mini as I waited outside for him!

Faunting the Highway Code tearing through the streets of Paisley, we screeched into the car park at Glenfield Park and sprinted towards the southern boundary. It was now 17.30hrs when we approached the site and conditions were perfect with low flat sunshine – but where was the bird? Patiently we waited, straining to hear that distinctive nasal song, but could hear nothing at all. Tension was slowly mounting, had it really gone? Surely not! It was prone to disappearing for long stretches, I reminded myself, remember what happened in the afternoon? I convinced myself that the bird was still here, even though the situation was beginning to look grim. Hector started to look slightly dejected by this point and asked "Are you sure it was an American wood warbler?" "It's still here, I know it is!" I replied.

Hector decided to check out some Rowan scrub further down the slope, while I remained above, scanning the conifer canopy. Suddenly, Hector shouted, "It's here, it's here! I'm looking straight at it! Tom, your ***** right, it is an American wood warbler!" To say that I felt vindicated would have been a sheer understatement. The joy and elation, followed by feeling of smug satisfaction was immense and I had a permanent grin welded from ear to ear.

The warbler now back in the conifers, started to sing high up in the canopy, giving us good clear views. We took more field notes and then consulted the Peterson field guide with excitement. Not in the first warbler plate, but there in the next, as clear as day, we both agreed to identifying an adult male Cape May Warbler in breeding plumage.

By 19.00hrs a who's who of local birders had gathered along with Hector and myself; Iain Gibson, David Carnduff, David Clugston, plus four or five others that I didn't recognise. Iain Gibson first relocated the Cape May Warbler as it perched on top of a Scot's Pine, back in its usual 'territory'. When his shout went out, there was sheer pandemonium, as certain people stampeded towards the bird. In hindsight, we should have been better organised and discussed viewing arrangements to prevent that scenario from happening. How can you stop impulsive human behaviour when you have a potential 'first' out there? You just go with the flow. The inevitable happened and David Clugston was the last person to see the bird as it flitted through the Sycamore canopy, 20 metres down the glen and disappeared for good.

We returned to the site early the following morning and found a small crowd had gathered around, talking in muted voices. It was our first introduction to the twitching fraternity and in conversation, we found out that some had travelled overnight from as far away as Kent! They huddled under the conifer trees, anxious glances at us every now and then, eager expectation etched all over their faces. Such a bitter disappointment for them all, but nobody was more disappointed than us. Saturday had soon become an anticlimax.

When we started researching into the species for background material, we were amazed to find the most extraordinary link with Alexander Wilson – cue the Twilight Zone theme music! Paisley's most famous ornithologist and poet was born there in 1766. He emigrated to America where he was considered by many to be the founding father of American ornithology. In 1811 he led an expedition to the Delaware basin on the eastern seaboard of North America. It was his close colleague George Ord, who actually first discovered the species in a Maple swamp within Cape May County, New Jersey. The bird was procured and presented to Wilson, who named it after the place of origin. Some 166 years later, the story had come round full circle with this bird constituting a first for Britain and the Western Palearctic, and today still remains the only such sighting of this species outside of North America.

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