

A Day in the Life of a Birder: In Pursuit of a Connecticut Warbler

My heart was racing as I ran across the railroad tracks. My binoculars bounced off my chest and I held my camera bag tightly. I had to make sure that I did not slip on the railroad tracks, for some of them appeared a little wet. I spied the waters of Falls Lake and knew that I was coming close to my destination. At last I came to the spot and leapt onto the shoulder of the railroad tracks. I made my way down the steep slope, jumping from rock to rock and being careful not to miss my footing and sprain an ankle. My right foot propelled me off of the last rock and I landed on solid ground, closer to that elusive prize.

I paused for a moment and caught my breath, exhausted from running on the railroad tracks. I had just rushed from school, with only a few hours of daylight left in the day, as the location was a half hour from home. After a few seconds I stood up and gazed at my surroundings on the peninsula ahead. I was facing a small isthmus of land, no more than a hundred feet wide that was bordered by the lake. I quickly but quietly crept forward, keeping my eyes peeled for my target bird. As I walked along the path I listened to the sounds of the birds around me. A slight motion caught my eyes and I glanced immediately at a tree. I raised my binoculars and focused on a songbird. Adjusting the dial a Palm Warbler came into view. I watched the bird preening itself on the branch for a couple seconds and then kept on walking.

It was a beautiful October day. There were no clouds in the sky, causing many birds to be out. I was amazed at how many Palm Warblers there were at the peninsula. Everywhere I turned my head I spotted one flying in the trees or foraging on the ground. There were a variety of colors amongst this species, with some being very pale while

others were completely yellow. Some individuals showed the signature red crown, while others did not. Though I enjoyed observing the Palm Warblers, this was not what I had come to the peninsula for.

I continued on my march along the peninsula. A Belted Kingfisher called and I turned my head to see it fly along the left side of the isthmus. I then spotted a Northern Flicker flying towards the opposite shore. I noticed the vegetation change with the appearance of willow trees; I was getting closer. Suddenly the trail veered to the right and came out onto the shore of the peninsula. The lake level was down several feet, allowing many grasses to grow and mudflats to appear. I spotted a Corona bottle on a stick and knew I was in the right area. The Corona bottle represented the edge of the area where my target bird had been seen in the previous days. Another Corona bottle was said to be located farther down near the end of the peninsula.

I watched for any movement amongst the willows and on the ground. An Eastern Bluebird female flew up from the shore and perched on a willow branch. Not surprisingly, Palm Warblers were everywhere. A couple Song Sparrows were also darting amongst the grasses. Suddenly, a flash of yellow caught my eye. I saw a warbler that appeared like a Yellowthroat vanish into one of the willow trees.

“Could that have been the bird?” I asked myself. I needed to have a better look.

I walked along the shore, stepping on the muddy ground with my boots. Looking out at the lake I saw some Great Egrets flying and landing in the water, finding a place to forage. The deep croak of a Great Blue Heron flying along the shore resonated across the lake. A Double-crested Cormorant turned its head in my direction and then dove into the water off of the shore. I soon came to the second Corona bottle and turned in towards the

trees. I walked up to the path. A warbler flew from the right and perched on a branch near the base of a small tree directly in front of me. I immediately raised my binoculars. The canopy cast the area in shade, but I was able to make out details on the bird. My heart raced as I saw a grayish head and throat and a yellowish brown back. After only a second or so the bird flew.

One thought entered my mind: Connecticut Warbler! “Could it be?” I stated out loud. “Could it be my target bird?” I pulled out my National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America from my backpack and looked up Connecticut Warbler, to verify my sighting. I glanced down at the Identifying: *Oporornis* Warblers section and read, “Connecticut Warblers have a more hooded look, with a fuller and complete eye ring (often with a break at the rear), and duller yellow underparts” (Dunn). The field marks were very convincing for my bird, and it resembled the illustration of the adult Connecticut Warbler female in my field guide. I was very certain that it was the Connecticut, but I needed more proof. No one had seen the Connecticut Warbler today, so my sighting would make this the fifth day the bird had been seen in the area. I would need to have a photo to justify my sighting.

I followed the path in the forest amongst the willow trees until I reached the first Corona bottle. I did not see the Connecticut, and retraced my steps back to the second Corona bottle along the shore. With no luck I continued further down the peninsula, but strangely there were no birds calling or flying anymore, at least this far down. I doubled back along the forest trail until I reached the first Corona bottle again. I was running out of time and needed to head back. I had come this far though, and I thought I would give it one more “birders” try. I stepped back out to the shore and started to walk. Suddenly a

warbler flew up into the bottom branches of a willow tree. No other birds were calling or flying, could this really be the Connecticut Warbler?

I crouched down and raised my binoculars to my eyes, focusing on the bird. A gray head and throat came into view, as well as a yellowish brown back. It was the Connecticut! I immediately turned my camera on and rushed to the side of the willow to get a better view of the bird, which had since moved into the upper levels of the tree. I walked around the willow and spied the female warbler hopping from one branch to another. I was less than five feet away from my life bird, and was being treated to spectacular looks of the species. I raised my camera and focused on the warbler. It was very difficult to have a clear glimpse on the bird, for the willow branches and leaves were covering it. It came more into the open, and I immediately started taking pictures. I reviewed my photos and only one came out pretty well. I tried to take another photograph, but the bird had moved farther into the willow tree.

I ran out onto the shore in front of the willow to try to get a better view, but the warbler remained hidden. I went back to the trail, but it flew farther down the peninsula. I searched amongst the willows and along the forest floor, but to no avail. I was not able to relocate it again, and had to head back, for it was getting late. I left the willow trees and Corona bottles and walked back to the railroad tracks. I jumped across the rocks and reached the tracks. I turned my head back in the direction of the peninsula and grinned with success. I had successfully relocated the Connecticut Warbler, photographed it, and gained a lifer in the process. I returned my gaze to the railroad tracks and began once again sprinting down the tracks, this time in the opposite direction of the lake.

“I am so glad I did not give up on the Connecticut and went back to search for the bird one last time!” I said out loud to myself. Another day in the life of a diehard birder searching for the ultimate prize – a life species! I felt satisfaction at seeing the beauty of nature, again.

Dunn, John L. and Jonathan Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2008.

Print



**Image of the railroad tracks I had to run across. The peninsula is to the right of the right sign.**



**Connecticut Warbler perching in the willow tree**