

# Cape May Warbler: new to Britain and Ireland

T. Byars and H. Galbraith



**P**aisley Glen comprises an area of ornamental parkland and mixed woodland on the outskirts of Paisley, about 15 km from Glasgow. While birdwatching there at 14.00 GMT on 17th June 1977, TB's attention was attracted by an unfamiliar song in an overgrown part of the glen. On locating the singer, he was immediately impressed by its combination of exotic coloration and warbler jizz, a combination which suggested to him that the bird was a species of American wood-warbler (Parulidae). TB kept the bird under observation until 15.30 hours, while he took field notes, and then left to fetch tape-recorder and photographic equipment. Twenty minutes after returning, he relocated the bird, again by song, and at 16.30, after taking photographs and recording its song, he informed HG of the bird's presence.

From 17.30 to 18.30, we kept the bird under observation while taking field notes; during this time, viewing conditions were excellent, with little wind and low, flat sunshine. On comparing our notes with the text and plates in Peterson (1947), we quickly became convinced that the bird was a male Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina* in breeding plumage. The bird was confiding and allowed itself to be approached down to 4½ m while it fed and sang among the trees and scrub. So frequently did it sing at this stage that we were both of the opinion that it had taken up territory and would probably stay for some time; unfortunately, this was not to be. At 19.00, there was the rather enthusiastic arrival of a group of local bird-watchers; with their arrival, the warbler became noticeably shyer and allowed only rather unsatisfactory glimpses of itself in the fading light; the following day it had gone.

This record constitutes the first for Britain and Ireland; indeed it appears to be the only reported occurrence, so far, outside the New World. The meteorological situation at the time has been described and discussed by Norman Elkins (*Brit. Birds* 72: 433).

## Description

First impressions were of a medium-sized warbler with dark upperparts contrasting strongly with bright yellow underparts, rump and half collar, the yellow of the breast, belly and flanks being broken by conspicuous black longitudinal stripes. The crown appeared black and the cheeks and ear-coverts red-brown.

**SIZE AND SHAPE** Appeared somewhat larger than Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, probably about size of Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*, though only former present for comparison. Same shape as Willow Warbler, but tended to perch in more upright position.

**HEAD AND UPPERPARTS** Forehead and crown black or very dark brown. Obvious yellow supercilium from base of upper mandible to slightly behind eye, where it merged with prominent red-brown patch covering cheeks and ear-coverts. Faint dark line through eye. Chin, throat, sides of neck and area between ear-coverts and nape bright yellow and, apart from throat, unmarked. Dark of crown extended down sides and back of head to meet supercilium, cheek patch, yellow behind ear and dark nape. Nape, mantle, back and scapular area dark grey-brown, but noticeably paler than crown, with conspicuous

black streaking forming distinct stripes extending from lower nape down over back, but not on to rump. White patch on otherwise dark closed wing formed by white tipping on median and greater coverts; at close range, this formed diffuse double wing-bar, but at greater distances it faded to a single patch: this feature, while not as obviously white as, for instance, wing patch of Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, nevertheless very noticeable. Rump unstreaked, yellow and conspicuous both in flight and at rest. Tail notched and uniformly dark; no white seen, though no tail-flicking observed. **UNDERPARTS** Chin, throat, breast and belly bright canary-yellow fading into off-white undertail-coverts. Black streaking on breast, belly and flanks formed prominent continuous longitudinal stripes. **BARE PARTS** Eye, bill and legs very dark. Bill finer and more pointed than that of Willow Warbler.

## Song and behaviour

During over two hours of observation, no vocalisations other than song were heard. The song consisted of one phrase of four notes repeated

1. Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*, USA, May 1978 (Adrian J. Dignan)



intermittently. Each phrase lasted from one to two seconds and can best be described as a flat 'swee-swee-swee-swee', repeated fairly quietly and with a slight nasal intonation. This song was delivered both from prominent tree tops and from deep in low-level scrub.

Throughout the period of observation, the bird frequented a small area of open mixed woodland and scrub-filled clearing, feeding mostly in spruce *Picea*, Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* and rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*. Most food items appeared to be taken from the leaves of those trees, but the warbler was also observed flycatching on a few occasions.

### **Distribution and migration**

As a breeding species, the Cape May Warbler occurs exclusively in Canada and the northern states of the USA, extending in a band from Nova Scotia east to Alberta, and from North Dakota in the south to Mackenzie in the north. Typical breeding habitat consists of open mixed and coniferous woodland. The main winter quarters are in the West Indies. Until recently (see below), the species occurred only sparingly as a migrant in the eastern USA and Canada.

Morris *et al.* (1958) and Kendeigh (1947) have shown that population levels of the Cape May Warbler rise—at times dramatically—during outbreaks of infestation by the spruce bud worm *Choristoneura fumiferana*. Hussell & Ridley (1978) concluded that one such infestation in Quebec and Ontario during the period 1969-77 resulted in significantly large increases in Cape May populations in these areas, resulting in turn in a greatly increased incidence of sightings at Long Point Bird Observatory on Lake Erie. Indeed, at Long Point, an increase of roughly 300% occurred

2. Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*, USA, October 1977 (Adrian J. Dignan)



between 1965 and 1975, with the Cape May becoming one of the most frequently recorded migrant warblers at the observatory. It may prove that a continuance of this high population will result in further occurrences in the Old World.

### **Historical note**

Interestingly, the ornithologist who first discovered the species, Alexander Wilson, was born and spent his youth in Paisley; in fact, his birthplace could be seen easily from Paisley Glen.

### **Acknowledgements**

We wish to thank Adrian J. Dignan for supplying his photographs and allowing their use in this paper; and Keith Brockie for his drawing of Cape May Warbler.

### **Summary**

A Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina* in song in wooded parkland at Paisley, Strathclyde, on 17th June 1977 was the first European observation of this Nearctic species.

### **References**

- HUSSELL, P. J. T., & RIDLEY, C. J. 1978. Monitoring bird populations by migrant sampling. Unpublished report to Canadian Wildlife Service.
- KENDEIGH, S. C. 1947. Bird population studies in the coniferous forest biome during a spruce bud worm outbreak. *Dept Lands and Forests, Ontario, Biol. Bull.* 1: 31-34.
- MORRIS, R. F., CHESHIRE, W. F., MILLER, C. A., & MOTT, D. G. 1958. The numerical response of avian and mammalian predators during a gradation of the spruce bud worm. *Ecology* 39: 599-619.
- PETERSON, R. T. 1947. *A Field Guide to the Birds*. Boston.

*T. Byars, 91 Lochfield Road, Paisley, Strathclyde*  
*H. Galbraith, Department of Natural History, Art Gallery and Museum,*  
*Kelvingrove, Glasgow G3 8AG*