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Mourning Warbler???

Glenn R. Mahler

On 12 September 1976, while mist-netting at Old Troy Park, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris Co., N.J., I captured a bird which at the time of banding I identified as a Mourning Warbler, *Oporornis philadelphia*. The bird was the first one of this species which I had handled and at first presented me with some confusion in identifying it.

Contrary to what I expected from the pictures in the standard field guides, the throat and the center of the breast were entirely yellow except for just the slightest hint of a hood which was created by the presence of a couple of very pale grey feathers which were visible on the breast when the bird was examined closely. Checking with Robbins' paper on the aging and sexing of Wood Warblers (*EBBA News*, Vol. 27, No. 5, pages 199-215) the bird checked out as an HY female on the basis of the following characteristics: (1) the skull was only partially ossified, (2) the broken eye-ring was buffy-yellow as opposed to whitish, and (3) the sides of the breast were dusky-olive rather than grayish. It weighed 13 grams (to the nearest half gram) and had an unflattened wing chord of 57 mm with a tail length of 50 mm. A number of photographs were taken and the bird was released with band number 870-01722.

Because of my initial confusion by the plumage of this bird, I decided to do some further reading on the species and discovered the paper by Lanyon and Bull (*Bird Banding*, 38:187-194, 1967) on identification of warblers of the genus *Oporornis*. To my great surprise the measurements which I took for the bird seemed to indicate that it was a MacGillivray's Warbler, *O. tolmiei* based on the wing length minus tail length of 7 mm. Lanyon and Bull found the "wing minus tail" measurement for *O. tolmiei* to be in the range 2-10 mm, while those of *O. philadelphia* were in the 10-18 mm range. Their key suggests the 9-11 mm range as the possible overlap range. However, the measurements on which the key was based represented flattened wing lengths as opposed to the unflattened measurements which I took; the tail measurements were taken with knife-edged calipers as opposed

to inserting a steel ruler (1 mm thick) between the central retrices as I did. I subsequently visited the American Museum of Natural History to examine the specimens there of both species and to speak with Dr. Lanyon about the measurement problems.

The following points regarding the specific determination of this bird can be made:

(1) The yellow color of the breast and throat match several specimens of *O. philadelphia* but none of the *O. tolmiei* in the AMNH collection. The pale breast color of the immature *O. tolmiei* tended to be much more gray-yellow or buff-yellow than true yellow. This color distinction is also noted in the Robbins paper. Dr. Lanyon, in our conversation, expressed the opinion, however, that color was too variable to be of value in separating the two species.

(2) The difference in measuring techniques make the direct use of Lanyon's key impossible. Applying a correction for the mode of tail measurement would yield a perhaps slightly longer tail length thus favoring the "wing minus tail" towards *O. tolmiei*; the correction for having taken wing chord rather than flattened wing length (perhaps 1-2 millimeters for a bird of this size) would push the "wing minus tail" toward *O. philadelphia*. The net result of the correction factors would be to put the "wing minus tail" measurement probably in the vicinity of 9 mm.

In conclusion, it would appear that although there is indeed a degree of uncertainty because of the differences in the techniques by which the measurements were taken, there is a strong possibility that this bird was a MacGillivray's Warbler, *Oporornis tolmiei*. The occurrence of this bird plus the occurrence of a MacGillivray's-like male at Brigantine, N.J. in June 1965 as described by Hailman (*Bird Banding*, 39:316-17, 1968) point out the possibility that this species may be occurring in the east, but is being overlooked by banders who are not aware of the method of separating the two species. ♦

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