

In Search of the Mourning Warbler

Text & Photos by Michael Chakan

I met Bill that evening at 6. He arrived an hour before me and was waiting around. Bill was nursing a broken ankle so I helped him open the cabin and carry his stuff in. The next couple of days we birded the Blue Ridge Parkway areas close to his cabin testing his walking ability with his ankle. Most of the birds seen were those that normally nest here since this area is not a very hot spring migration fly thru compared to the fall. After a few days of birding and wild flowering in this area we decided to check out a new area near Roan Mountain that we learned about from a birder last year. Early the next day we drove to the Hampton Creek Nature Preserve in Tennessee. This was a large track of land recently purchased by the Nature Conservancy and open to birding and hiking. We arrived there just before 8 AM. As we walked into the field what I

heard reminded me of the opening scene when Julie Andrews burst into song singing, "The Hills are Alive With the Sound of Music" for here before us "The Fields were alive with the Sounds of Bird Songs". There were singing Song Sparrows, Field Sparrows, Indigo Bunting, Chestnut Sided Warbler, Carolina Wren, Common Yellow Throat, Towee, Cardinal, House Wren, Rose Breasted Grosbeak, Red Eye Vireo plus a half dozen others that blended in with them. Bill sorted through the sounds and said he heard a Yellow Breasted Chat among them. Sure enough he found the singing Chat in a nearby tree singing his head off and affording us great looks at him. As we walked through the fields I heard the distinct zzzzz sound of the Golden Wing Warbler. He soon flew up on a branch and serenaded me. Bill located another one about

ten minutes later. Last year they reported six Golden Wings and a Blue Wing Warbler here! We soon heard another song and spotted its source as a Male American Redstart. We then had to retreat back to the car as the rains started to come down. What a great day.

Our original plans called for a few days of birding the Parkway, then Roan Mountain and Hampton Creek then we were going to head off to Port Clinton, Ohio and the Crane Creek State Park. This place according to Ken Hauffman and other birders we've talked to claim that the boardwalk here is better for spring migration than even Cape May! If time permitted we were hoping to hit the Cranberry Bogs in West Virginia to try for the Mourning Warbler which supposedly breeds here at the most southern part of their breeding range.

As luck would have it the long range weather forecast called for severe storms in the Ohio area for the next few days. We decided to put Crane Creek off for another time and try our luck for the Mourning Warbler which would be a life bird for both of us.

The next morning we set off for the Cranberry Bogs, 300 miles away. We arrived at the bogs boardwalk about 3 PM only to be met by a heavy down pour which we sat in the car and waited out for half an hour. After it stopped





Clasp Milkweed

we carefully walked the boardwalk which was very slippery from the rain. The boardwalk stretches and circles the bogs for a half mile.

We heard many singing birds and identified Louisiana Waterthrush, Canadas, Magnolia, Common Yellowthroat, Red Breasted Nuthatch and what Bill described as a strange sounding chickadee which turned out to be a Black Capped. We decided to go to the visitor center to see if there were any reported sightings of the Mourning Warbler. There had been two sightings one on the nature trail right at the center and another down highway 150 leading from the center at an overlook. We birded some more around the center then headed for town and checked into a motel.

The next morning we headed back to the nature center and birded

the trails. We heard what we thought was a singing Mourning Warbler along with most of the birds mentioned before but we could not get him to come to us. We then headed to the other overlook where one was reported. We arrived at what we thought was the overlook (which we later found out was not the right place) and barely had room to pull off the road to park. We started birding the shoulder of the road and Bill immediately got onto a beautiful Bay Breasted Warbler. We both had great looks at him and Bill was excited because this was a true

migrant and not breeding in this area. After getting on a few other local breeders we split up with Bill walking south and me north. After a while after not seeing anything new I headed back to the car. When

I got to the car I looked down the road and saw Bill waving to me and motioning to me to come. I slowly drove the car to him and he guided me to an area to park. I got out and asked him what he saw. He replied he saw the bird. I asked what bird. He replied the MOURNING WARBLER and pointed up a tree! And there it was, singing his head off! We must have been close to its nest cause he didn't want to leave the area. He flew from one tree to another singing and displaying. We watched him for almost a half hour getting real close looks at it and then he flew away. After hi-fiveing each other for five minutes we headed down the road to explore the rest of the area before heading home with a another life tick mark in our book.



Parrot Lily