

Double Take: A Warbler That Doesn't Fit in a Box

Intergeneric hybrid? Partially axanthic purebred? Something else?

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On October 4, 2017, I was birding in Nahanton Park, Newton, Massachusetts. This 55-acre park, a mix of community garden plots and riparian forest, is situated along the Charles River adjacent to the extensive Cutler Park floodplain. At around 8:30 a.m., I was standing at the far end of the “upper garden,” where the sun often warms the forest early. A bright yellow bird flew up to me and then quickly on to a nearby tree. It showed white in the face and yellow on the under-parts, and I thought to myself, “Magnolia.” Closer inspection of the bird and subsequent analysis of photographs showed something different, however: a very striking bird unlike any I had ever seen.

In addition to the featured photo, I present three supplemental photos (opposite page) of the same individual; these, too, are from October 4.

The bird was patterned like a Prairie Warbler, likely a hatch-year bird by the worn wing and tail feathers. The behavior was consistent with Prairie Warbler; the bird was active, and it bobbed its tail. But there were a number of problems with this identification.

Here's a rundown of the differences from typical Prairie Warbler plumage: (1) All the yellow in the head is replaced by white, so that the chin and malars are clear white. (2) The white throat meets the yellow chest in a sharp line. (3) The crown and dark coloration of the face are a pure powdery bluish, without any olive tinge, and sharply delineated from the nape and mantle, which are olive washed with gray. (4) The wing-bars, formed by pale feather edges on the greater and median coverts, are whitish, not yellowish; so are much of the primary edges. (5) The eye crescents are strikingly white (but a more-muted version of that character is not uncommon in hatch-year Prairie Warblers).

Structurally, the tail is short relative to the under-tail coverts.

There are subtler divergences from typical hatch-year Prairie Warblers. The yellow under-parts are brightest on the breast, just below the white chin, fading to a yellow wash at the belly and to paler, whitish under-tail coverts. The mantle and wings are grayer and more lacking in yellow tones than in any Prairie Warbler I have seen or seen photographs of.

This bird was subsequently seen by others on October 5, and again by me and others on October 7. It's as if the coloration of the front part of the bird were hijacked by some other species. But what?

Prior to 2011, as far as I have been able to determine, there were no recorded hybrids of Prairie Warbler. Since then, there have been two records of Prairie Warbler x Blue-winged Warbler hybrids (Frances A. Crane Wildlife Management Area, Massachusetts, June 2011, and Seidman Park, Michigan, May 2014) and a single record of a Prairie Warbler x Yellow Warbler hybrid (Allegan County, Michigan, June 2013). Neither of these possibilities accounts for the peculiarities of the Nahanton Park



Featured Photo—October 4, 2017. Nahanton Park, Newton, Massachusetts.
Photo by © Haynes Miller.

Supplemental photos—October 4, 2017.
Nahanton Park, Newton, Massachusetts.
Photos by © Haynes Miller.

bird, and the available photographs show quite a different appearance.

I considered the possibility that the bird had Tennessee Warbler as a parent. For starters, an important field mark of Tennessee Warbler is the short tail. Also, male Tennessee Warblers in alternate plumage show a slate-gray crown and white or whitish throat. However, this bird is likely a hatch-year individual in formative plumage, and, no matter what it is, it is not in alternate plumage. Moreover, the Nahanton Park bird has a more dramatic white throat than any Tennessee Warbler I have seen or seen photos of. The mantle color is grayer than that of any example of either Prairie Warbler (which is yellower) or Tennessee Warbler (which is greener). And hybrids generally show a smoother mix of characteristics.

Another hybrid possibility: Magnolia x Prairie? Some fall Magnolia Warblers are quite gray-headed, even blue-gray on the head like this bird. The rest of the bird's plumage generally isn't too far afield for a fall Magnolia, with the extensive white on the wing being particularly suggestive of that species.

Or is it "just" a Prairie Warbler with, as my friend Nick Komar put it, "pigment issues"? The condition known as axanthism—lack of yellow pigment—would account for the white throat, whitish stripes on the face, and white edging to the wing feathers. But the bird presents seemingly normally yellow pigment elsewhere.

I welcome the comments of ABA members regarding this unusual bird. The Featured Photo has been posted to The ABA Blog, and the comments section will remain open indefinitely.



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