



## The Blue-winged Warbler in County Cork – a new Western Palearctic bird

Steve Wing

On Tuesday 3rd October 2000, the after-effects of Hurricane Isaac hit southwest Ireland, with torrential rain and winds reaching 80mph. Birders on Cape Clear Island, County Cork, spent the day sheltering; one or two efforts were made to venture out, but they were very decidedly short lived!

The following morning saw a complete change. The day dawned with a gentle breeze and blue skies and, it has to be said, a great deal of anticipation. Three of us left the bird observatory at about 8.00am, with plans to split up and cover as much of the island as possible. I went straight to the Waist, while Willie McDowell searched the bushes alongside Cotters Hill and Dennis Weir went into Cotters Garden.

It was Dennis that hit the jackpot almost immediately! As he entered the garden, he was greeted with a call that 'sounded not unlike a Myrtle Warbler'. After a few seconds, a bird appeared in the bushes, very briefly, showing a bright yellow front, a green back and bluish-grey wings. Dennis whistled to Willie, who was

quickly at his side: "What have you got?" "I think it's an American!" "An American WHAT?" "Well, I reckon it may be a Blue-winged."

I received a very broken 'phone call on my mobile telling me to get down to Cotters to see a ..... The signal disappeared just as the species was to be mentioned, not just once but twice! I did not wait to hear the third effort, I just ran! By the time I reached them, Dennis and Willie were staring into a bank of bracken and not looking particularly excited. "What is it?" I demanded, "and where is it?!"

Having by now had good views and confirmed that it was indeed a Blue-winged Warbler, they told me what it was – and the sad news that it had dropped into the bracken and not be seen since. We split again, to try to relocate the bird, which Dennis did within five minutes, back in the same place where he first found it. I have honestly never moved so fast!

The bird showed well and there was no mistaking it. It was a stunning, bright

Plate 1. First-winter male Blue-winged Warbler *Vermivora pinus*, Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, Ireland, October 2000 (Rob Wilson). The first for the Western Palearctic.







Plates 2 & 3. First-winter male Blue-winged Warbler *Vermivora pinus*, Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, Ireland, October 2000 (Phil Palmer). Note the pinkish colour on the bill (dark in adults).

individual and, without doubt, a bird to be shared: we quickly telephoned other birders on the island and on the mainland.

The bird stayed until 10th October and gave excellent views to the many visiting birders, although it did become more and more mobile as the days passed. Food appeared to be no problem for it, as it fed almost continuously before taking short breaks to digest the grubs it was catching. In all, about 600 birders visited the island to see this gem, the first Blue-winged Warbler to be recorded in the Western Palearctic. A collection taken raised just over £800 towards the restoration of the bird observatory and also for buying new books for the observatory library. Our thanks go to all contributors.

#### Description

The general impression was of a warbler-like bird just slightly larger than a Willow Warbler, with a yellow head and belly, black face-mask and dark wings. It spent much of its time in nettle patches, gleaning insects from the undersides of leaves, and frequently hanging upside down.

**Head** Forehead, chin and throat bright yellow. Small dark triangle at base of bill. Lores very dark grey/black, narrow at the bill, wider in front of eye. Black eye-stripe reaching just behind eye. Crown greenish-olive – appearing greenish-yellow in some lights. Occasionally the yellow forehead appeared to stretch further back, perhaps

suggesting an adult bird, but video evidence indicates this to be a trick of the light. Eye dark with yellow eye-lids. Bill dark grey with a pinkish base, strong and fairly long.

**Upperparts** Like the crown, apparently changing from greenish-olive to greenish-yellow, depending on the light conditions. Tail dark bluish-grey, with white triangles on the outer edges, formed by white patches on the outer three tail feathers. Wings a similar bluish-grey, sometimes appearing very blue in good light, with two off-white wing-bars. Secondaries and tertials edged greenish-olive.

**Underparts** From chin to vent bright yellow. Undertail-coverts white and appearing fairly long. Thighs white. Legs dark grey with yellow soles.

#### Age and sex

Reference to Dunn & Garrett (*Warblers*, 1997) and Sibley (*The North American Bird Guide*, 2000) indicated that it was a first-winter male: the yellow forehead did not reach behind the eye and the demarcation between the yellow and green was indistinct; the 'mask' was very dark grey and not black; the wing-bars were comparatively narrow and off-white (not broad and white); and the bill showed pale on the lower mandible. Also the undertail-coverts were white (not yellow-tinged as in first-winter female).

Steve Wing, Warden, Cape Clear Bird Observatory, Co. Cork, Ireland.





Plates 4 & 5. Adult Blue-winged Warblers *Vermivora pinus*, USA, Summer, male, above, Plate 4 (Alan Murphy) and female (Brian E. Small/VIREO). Adult females are only slightly duller than adult males.







Plates 6 & 7. First-winter male Blue-winged Warbler *Vermivora pinus*, Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, Ireland, October 2000 (Paul Hackett, left, plate 6, and Mike Edgecombe videographs).

Blue-winged Warbler breeds widely in scrub and open woodland in the north-eastern USA and adjacent southernmost Canada and winters in Mexico and northern Central America. It has dramatically expanded its range to the north and northeast throughout the 1900s and it now regularly wanders to the west coast, and north to Newfoundland. It is generally absent from the northern states after mid September and from the mid Atlantic coast after the end of September, although late dates on the east coast do extend well into October (Dunn & Garrett 1997). This is the first record for the Western Palearctic and there are now 25 species of North American warbler on the Western Palearctic list:

- Black-and-white Warbler
- Golden-winged Warbler
- Blue-winged Warbler
- Tennessee Warbler
- Northern Parula
- Yellow Warbler
- Chestnut-sided Warbler
- Cerulean Warbler
- Black-throated Blue Warbler
- Black-throated Green Warbler
- Blackburnian Warbler
- Cape May Warbler
- Magnolia Warbler
- Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warbler
- Palm Warbler
- Blackpoll Warbler
- Bay-breasted Warbler
- American Redstart
- Ovenbird
- Northern Waterthrush
- Louisiana Waterthrush
- Common Yellowthroat
- Hooded Warbler
- Wilson's Warbler
- Canada Warbler

Another 12 seem likely further candidates: Orange-crowned, Nashville, Prairie, Pine, Yellow-throated, Worm-eating, Prothonotary, Swainson's, Kentucky, Connecticut and Mourning Warblers, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

Blue-winged Warbler regularly hybridises with the closely related but very differently marked Golden-winged Warbler *V. chrysoptera* to produce variants such as 'Brewster's Warbler' and 'Lawrence's Warbler'. Golden-winged Warbler generally breeds slightly further north than Blue-winged Warbler, but the ranges overlap considerably. Although the plumage pattern of Golden-winged is very different to that of Blue-winged, some of these hybrid variants can appear quite close to pure Blue-winged so, despite its striking appearance, any future vagrant Blue-winged Warbler should still be identified with care.

The 'twitch' went extremely well and was declared by the bird observatory and Bird-Watch Ireland staff (as well as the islanders and local boatmen) a very successful event in promoting birding in Ireland in general and Cape Clear Bird Observatory in particular. The over £800 donated by about 600 visiting birders – far and away a record 'twitch' and a record collection for Ireland – will go towards the Cape Clear Bird Observatory refurbishment appeal: over £30,000 has been raised and spent so far. Quite a few birders did not get a chance to donate as Steve Wing was often busy with general liaison, but anyone who would like to make a donation can send it direct to BirdWatch Ireland, Cape Clear Appeal, Ruttledge House, 8 Longford Place, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland. Eds.

