

The Canada Warbler in County Clare – the second for the Western Palearctic

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In County Clare, Ireland, Sunday 8th October 2006 was wet and windy. I contacted my good friend Seamus Enright and explained my plans to travel to look for the Red-eyed Vireo reported at Kilbaha, near Loop Head, and I suggested he might like to accompany me... after all, it was October! Seamus agreed, and at 2.00pm we arrived at Kilbaha and immediately began searching for the vireo. With the assistance of another birder already present, we located our quarry in the pub garden. The vireo proved quite elusive for a while, but eventually it showed well. We watched it for some time and then I ventured off to check the other gardens towards Loop Head, while Seamus decided to stay at the pub garden and try to photograph the vireo.

I decided to drive from the pub some 300m towards Loop Head (unfortunately for Seamus!) and first check the garden at Peter Gibson's farm. The weather began to clear, and the sun suddenly came out as if it had been trapped inside for days. Some birds began to appear,

with one Chiffchaff being the prize amongst the commoner garden species. I then heard a sound behind me. I have no idea what it was, but it made me look round. And then, at 4.45pm, I saw a *golden* bird sitting in a small sycamore with the evening sun beaming upon it. Was I dreaming? No! There *was* a *golden* bird sitting there!

I moved closer and noted its obvious features. With one hand on my binoculars and the other on my mobile phone, I rang Seamus. I was met with a relaxed "hello", but I declared: "Seamus, I have a luminous American warbler! Whatever it is, we have a mega! Hurry!". I quickly described it to him: "it has a golden breast and throat, whitish eye-ring, white undertail-coverts and blue-grey upperparts". I ran to the car, hastily thumbed through the Sibley Guide, and returned to the Sycamore tree, while Seamus was on his way up the road at electric speed. "Where is it?" he gasped, to which I replied "I think it is a Canada Warbler"... but the bird was missing!

Plate 1. First-winter Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Loop Head, Co. Clare, Ireland, October 2006 (*John Carter*). The first for Ireland and only the second ever seen in Europe (the other being in Iceland on 29th September 1973).





Plates 2-3. First-winter Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Loop Head, Co. Clare, Ireland, October 2006 (*Kit Day*, above, and *John Carter*). Being blue-grey above, luminous yellow below with white undertail-coverts, and sporting a bold off-white eye-ring and pale pink legs, the Kilbaha Canada Warbler was a special treat for all who saw it. The fleshy 'baby' feet and brown alula feather visible here prove it to be a first-winter, and the very indistinct gorget of streaks suggests that it is probably a female.





Plates 4-7. Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Loop Head, Co. Clare, Ireland, October 2006 (*Kit Day*, above, *Michael O'Keeffe*, below left, and *Rob Wilson*). There is an olive tone to the blue-grey upperparts, and this is particularly evident on the forehead, lores and ear-coverts. Although sometimes less than obvious, the gorget of dark striations (in combination with the off-white eye-ring) made for a straightforward identification. Kirtland's Warbler has a similar face pattern, but is streaked above and below, plus it has wing-bars. At a glance, Kentucky Warbler may show a rather similar head pattern, but it has no breast streaking and green upperparts. Connecticut, Mourning and MacGillivray's Warblers are also quite plain-looking with yellow underparts; they also show something of an eye-ring, but all are dusky on the throat and green above.





Plate 8. First-summer female Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Texas, USA, April 2000 (Brian E. Small). Note the heavily abraded tail feathers are narrow with tapered tips, and the alula is narrow and pointed. Also, several inner greater coverts have been recently replaced, creating a moult contrast in this feather tract.

Plate 9. Adult female Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Ohio, USA, May 1999 (Arthur Morris/Birds as Art). The face and breast pattern of adult females mirrors that of the male, but the black feathering is restricted to speckling on the forehead and lower ear-coverts, and the breast streaking is subdued. Some first-summer males can, however, look very similar (or sometimes indistinguishable).





Plate 10. Male Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Minnesota, USA, June 2002 (Brian E. Small).

Plate 11. Adult male Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Ontario, Canada, May 1998 (Arthur Morris/Birds as Art). Black and yellow is a recurring theme amongst the North American warblers, but with its blue upperparts, neat white eye-ring, black face and gorget of black streaks, Canada Warbler cuts quite a dash!





Plate 12. First-winter Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, Loop Head, Co. Clare, Ireland, October 2006 (*Kit Day*). This gem of a bird was twitchable throughout its six-day stay, before finally departing on the night of Friday the 13th....

The next few minutes seemed like hours. Would it ever be seen again? But then the welcome words "I have it" came from Seamus. What relief for both of us! It was time to ring out the news. I called Eric Dempsey and was greeted with the familiar healthy welcome, but I had to interrupt him to explain "we are looking at a Canada Warbler on Loop Head". I was so excited, I could no longer talk and I handed the phone to Seamus to finish the conversation while I just leapt about! We made more calls, and from the reactions and congratulations we received, the enormity of the find began to sink in. It was not a dream: we were looking at Ireland's first (and the Western Palearctic's second) Canada Warbler.

We continued watching the bird, noting other features such as the pink legs, faint breast markings and unmarked tail *etc*, until about 6.30pm, by which time the first of the local birders had arrived and also seen the bird.

The bird remained in the sycamores and other trees of the garden over the next five days and hundreds of observers travelled to see it from all over Ireland, Britain and Europe. It could be quite elusive in the thickly wooded garden but, with patience, it always showed well and, eventually, a range of fine photographs was obtained.

The only previous record of a Canada Warbler in the Western Palearctic concerns a moribund male caught in an old car dump at Sandgerði, Iceland, on 29th September 1973 (with the corpse preserved at the Icelandic Institute of Natural History).

Special thanks are due to Peter Gibson, whose farm entrance and garden turned into a huge attraction, the people of Kilbaha for their patience with the unexpected influx of birders (which did wonders for the pub and bar trade!) and, of course, to the hundreds of birders who obeyed the observation and parking requests. *Maurice Hanafin, Co. Kerry, Ireland.*

This is the 19th species of North American Warbler to join the British & Irish list. Canada Warbler breeds commonly in cool, moist, mixed forests with dense understorey from central Canada to the north-eastern USA, and winters in northern South America. It migrates mostly overland, following the Gulf Coast through Central America, and is an early migrant in autumn, so is a less likely candidate for transatlantic vagrancy than some other North American warblers, such as Blackpoll Warbler, which regularly take a more direct, over-sea route, thus rendering them more likely to be caught up in Atlantic weather systems.

Canada Warbler undergoes a partial post-juvenile moult, which may be completed prior to migrating, and involves all the body feathers and the wing coverts. The remiges, primary coverts, alula, tertials and rectrices are not moulted at this time. Adults undergo a complete post-breeding moult. Both adults and first-winters replace some feathers in a partial pre-breeding moult in the winter, with first-winters acquiring some new greater coverts. The Kilbaha Canada Warbler can be aged as a first-winter by its still juvenile, brownish-toned alula feather, while its legs and feet are still fresh and fleshy. The legs and feet of small passerines such as this 'harden' with time, becoming somewhat dry and scaly in appearance as they age.

Sexing first-winter Canada Warblers is not always possible and the Kilbaha bird may be such an individual, as it appears rather distinctly blue-grey above, with a rather sharply-defined border to the lower ear-coverts (suggesting a male), but it has only very indistinct breast-streaking (suggestive of it being a female). Some first-winter females are certainly less colourful, more olive on the upperparts and more undistinguished-looking than this bird. However, although the breast streaking and dark face pattern can be largely obscured in first-winter male plumage, close examination of the photographs reveals no black feathers at all, as might be expected were it to be a male. Thus it is probably quite safe to say that the Kilbaha Canada Warbler was most likely to have been a first-winter female. *Eds.*

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