

Cape May Warblers (*Dendroica tigrina*) in California's Central Valley

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While watching his son Kevin's competitive level soccer team tryouts on 1 March 2003, JML heard an unfamiliar chip note in the trees fifty yards behind him bordering Sacramento's Larchmont Park along Linda Rio Drive. Walking over to the source of the sound, he discovered an adult male Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*) and immediately called his wife, Laurie, over to confirm it and used her cell phone to call several Sacramento area birders. JT was the first to arrive, shortly followed by Ed Greaves, Tim and Annette Manolis, and TE. All were treated to fine looks of the Central Valley's first "spring" and second overall record, which was also the first record for Sacramento County.

Having received excellent photos of the bird from five photographers, JML did not write a description, opting instead to submit several collages of photos by these photographers to the Sacramento Bird Records Committee (see two examples of these on the cover of this issue). Therefore, the following description is abstracted from JT's notes:

Cape May's body shape compared to Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) seen with it was similar, but it was proportionately shorter tailed and about 10-15 percent smaller. Bill shape was perhaps a bit more decurved than most congeners, smaller and finer than those of Yellow-rumped Warbler and all dark gray/blackish; legs and feet similarly colored and irides likewise dark. The front was darkly matted with sap, the crown dark gray. The superciliary was bright yellow with a hint of chestnut at the midpoint, set off from below by a blackish eyeline running from the base of the bill to shortly beyond the eye. The auriculars were mostly richly chestnut except for a small area posteroinferiorly, which appeared washed yellowish. The inferior borders of the auricular patch were also bright yellow and this color extended to the side of the neck. The chin and upper throat were bright, almost cadmium yellow. This was the background color while the venter was strongly patterned as described below. Originating at the lower throat and breast were parallel strong blackish streaks that formed mostly continuous lines running onto the sides and flanks. The lower ventral midline was spared of dark markings, the belly being bright yellow and the undertail coverts much paler yellow. The tail from below appeared thinly margined in blackish laterally and fairly prominently tipped

blackish, with the basal two-thirds whitish. The back appeared greenish and moderately strongly streaked with blackish. The rump was strongly yellowish tending slightly to greenish. The panel of the folded wings was notable particularly for the extensive white patch formed by the median coverts and the broad white edges of the greater coverts. The dark centerlines of these latter feathers were often visible on some of those nearer the dorsum.

Though sound first attracted the attention of JML, JT did not hear this bird call during his first observation. On 3 March, Chris Conard heard a call-note he described as “a high, sharp ‘tip’- higher, sharper, and fainter than Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*).” He said it was only given occasionally, once in a series of several notes spaced 1-2 seconds apart. On 4 March, JT heard the call note a few times, and described it as an abrupt, high, thin “seet.” Conard heard the bird singing softly on 30 March, but the song was weak and hard to hear.

The Cape May Warbler foraged both by probing buds and bark and also by flycatching. If briefly lost from view, it could often easily be refound owing to its aggressive defense of its preferred tree, a budding valley oak near the southeast corner of the park. It would occasionally fly to a birch tree in the adjacent backyard and late on 3 March, Conard saw the bird disappear south across street into a eucalyptus, apparently to roost. This Cape May Warbler was fairly easily found for the first week or so after its discovery. As the trees on the east margin of the park leafed out progressively from south to north, the bird tended to favor budding trees to the north. Oaks, birches, alders and eucalyptus trees were all used for foraging. After about 10 March, the Cape May Warbler was less reliable. JT last saw the bird on 3 April, only his third successful visit in nine attempts after 10 March. The authors know of no subsequent reports.

There is one previous report of Cape May Warbler for the Central Valley. At Lodi Lake Recreation Area, San Joaquin County, TE, accompanied by Fritz Steurer, found a male Cape May Warbler on 9 October 1999. It was in a mixed species flock of about 25 birds, the others being common western migrants. The following description is from TE's notes:

The bird was noticeably smaller than the nearby Yellow-rumped Warblers, closer in size to the Orange-crowned Warblers. The impression from below was of a bird stout of body and very short of tail, with a pointy bill. The ventral side was mostly yellow, most richly yellow on the belly, with black streaking beginning near the chin becoming progressively heavier toward the vent. The streaking on the belly was more confined to the lateral belly and flanks. The area around the legs appeared whitish, as did the unmarked undertail coverts. The undertail covert projection, like the tail itself, was short, especially as compared to the Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned

warblers. The middle of the undertail was white with a thin black margin on the sides and a heavier black margin at the tip. TE never saw the bird spread or fan his tail. Side views revealed a slim, dark line through the eye that started near the bill and ended just behind the eye. The bird had a well-defined yellow supercilium that wrapped around the auriculars and gave a nice outlined look to them. The auriculars were a paler color than the unstreaked supercilium. Based on scant looks, most of the bird's upper parts had an olive green cast, and the mantle did not have any heavy streaking. The sides of the rump were yellow-green. The wing pattern was striking. The median coverts had a short, wide, bold wing bar that was whitish, with a slight yellowish cast. This bar seemed to bleed over to the greater coverts making it look like a large whitish patch. The rest of the wing panel was darkish with some lighter olive cast to it. The primary projection appeared very long, but it was not directly compared to any other birds present. The upper tail appeared to be the darkest part of the plumage. Iris color was not recalled. The legs and feet were black. The upper mandible appeared blackish its full length, but the lower mandible was bicolored, but exact colors were not recalled. Bill shape recalled that of Orange-crowned Warbler. Based on plumage characters, especially of the folded wing and pattern and intensity of ventral streaking, TE was certain the Cape May Warbler was a male, but not sure of its age.

This bird was sought later that day and the next, but without success.

Statewide, Cape May Warbler is a very rare fall and casual spring vagrant (Garrett & Dunn, 1981). About two-thirds of the birds occur in autumn and the species also winters casually in the state (Roberson 1980). The early October date of the Lodi Lake bird is within the usual window of discovery of fall vagrants in California. Spring vagrants are usually discovered in late May or early June (Roberson 1980). There are three March records cited in Roberson (1980) that have a somewhat similar pattern to the Larchmont bird: 1 Feb-18 Apr 1976 in Santa Cruz, 5-20 March 1978 at Finney Lake, Imperial County, and 29 Dec 1979-March 1980 at Goleta, Santa Barbara County. Garrett & Dunn (1981) give the range for this latter record as 29 Dec 1979-13 Apr 1980. It seems likely to us that the Larchmont Cape May Warbler may have wintered locally but was not discovered until near the end of its winter stay.

LITERATURE CITED

- Garrett, K., and Jon Dunn. 1981. *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution*. Los Angeles Audubon Society, Los Angeles, CA.
- Roberson, D. 1980. *Rare Birds of the West Coast*. Woodcock Publications, Pacific Grove, CA.