

June 2009: Meditations on a Bird Quest

I was on a quest: find nesting Louisiana waterthrushes on Coastal Mountains Land Trust's Ducktrap River Preserve. For the past three springs I have heard and seen Louisiana waterthrushes along the Ducktrap River in Lincolnville. Louisiana waterthrushes are very early migrants, usually reaching their northernmost breeding grounds by late April, according to several of my bird guides. One of Maine's leading bird biologists had told me that birds singing as late in spring as I had heard them in 2007 and 2008 would indicate breeding birds. If I could find a pair and observe them long enough, I might see evidence of nesting—which would establish the Preserve as the northeastern-most extreme of this "southern" bird's breeding range. I wanted bragging rights for the Land Trust.

My plan was this: I was going to find a good spot along the riverbank near where I had last heard a waterthrush and wait to hear him sing. Then I would try to observe him for as long as I could in hopes of seeing him fly to a nest. It seemed so simple. I had visions of spending the morning in Zen-like absorption of my natural surroundings, my patience to be rewarded with proof of what I sought.

However, when I arrived at the Preserve, I quickly realized I was going to have to amend my plan. In my blissful vision of a riverside, bird-watching idyll, I had forgotten about black flies. They swarmed me the instant I got out of my car. I had to put on my head net before putting on my rubber boots. Swathed in my head net and a Buzz-off kerchief, with a baseball cap to keep the net down, I headed to the river. Birds were singing all around me as I followed a path through verdant false hellebore and unfurling ferns to the silty edge of the river, where matted debris from recent high water had snarled in the lowest tree limbs. I could see the tree where I had last observed the waterthrush, found a log to sit on, and got out my notebook.



False hellebore along the Ducktrap River.

I jotted a list of a dozen or so birds singing around me, including seven warbler species—but not a Louisiana waterthrush. When I tried to actually see a bird whose song I was unsure of, however, I realized that it's not easy to use binoculars with a head net. Not impossible, but not easy. To top it off, flies were starting to congregate on the underside of my cap's visor, and the visual distraction alone was already starting to make me crazy.

This wasn't going to work. I needed to keep moving up the trail, with any luck hearing a waterthrush further upriver. The Peterson Series' *Warblers* field guide emphasized that Louisiana waterthrushes prefer forested rivers. The Ducktrap's clear waters roll along over a gravel streambed striated with deposits of silt, with deep, tannic brown pools tucked up against banks and bends, shaded by young maples, birches, alders. Perfect habitat. I felt certain they were here somewhere; I still had hope.

A blue jay flew across the trail very quietly, eyeing me. I wondered if it had a nest nearby, since blue jays are usually prompt to alert others to the presence of forest trespassers. On my last visit to this Preserve, in fact, I had heard a jay imitating a broad-winged hawk as I walked past. (I have also heard them imitate red-shouldered hawks and ospreys.) So when I heard what sounded like the piping whine of an eagle, I looked to the blue jay. Still silent. I looked up: four eagles circled overhead, an unexpected blessing.

Bloodthirsty black flies drove me onward up the trail, past the reclaimed gravel pit with its vernal pools marked by the occasional trills of grey tree frogs. As I began to turn away from the river and climb the bluff above the gravel pit, I heard the burry, melodious song of a scarlet tanager up ahead. The bugs appeared to have thinned a bit, so I pulled back my head net and tried to find the tanager, whose glowing red plumage is not hard to spot. Around me in the trees I could hear a black-throated blue warbler—a blue, black, and white jewel of a bird; several Blackburnian warblers—tiny birds noted for their flaming orange heads; a blue-headed vireo—a striking blue-green bird with yellow flanks and white “spectacles”; and a couple of black-throated green warblers, whose little round yellow faces shine like the sun. Creatures of great beauty were singing in the trees all around me and I couldn't manage to see any of them. But sometimes it's enough to know the beauty is there. Certainly the songs were enough.

A bird walk usually doesn't translate well into a traditional narrative story arc. Sometimes there's no epiphany, no climactic moment to punctuate the day, no exciting new find to add to your life list. Or there are several small moments that simply add up to a good walk: the four eagles, a Nashville warbler gleaning bugs off willow catkins five feet from my face, a conclave of blue-headed vireos that surrounded me when I paused along the trail to vainly listen for a waterthrush, the drumming of a ruffed grouse that rose from the earth like the forest's heartbeat. The woods smelled damp and rich, of clean things rotting and growing. The small wildflowers of the understory were emerging from the leaf litter: Canada mayflower with its green buds, clintonia, sarsparilla, Indian cucumber, painted trillium, Jack-in-the-pulpit, partridgeberry, wintergreen.

Familiar flowers, familiar bird songs: these were the woods of my home habitat. Just saying their names to myself, witnessing their return, brought me joy as I walked along on my fruitless quest.

I hiked a mile up the trail and back. Eventually I even got a striking view of the scarlet tanager singing his heart out in a tree, framed by leaves and blue sky. I heard a raven's "quork," the long, loud laugh of a pileated woodpecker, and distant, ethereal flute songs of hermit thrushes. But despite one last foray into the black fly red-zone along the river, I did not find a Louisiana waterthrush. No matter. Sometimes a quest doesn't always work out the way you expect. But you usually get what you needed. That morning I must have needed nature's soul-soothing reminder of spring's renewing spirit more than I needed to verify a state nesting record.

Next time, though, I'm slathering on the bug dope and I'm going to hunt down that sucker and find his nest if it's the last thing I do before being borne away by thousands of black flies.