

Illinois's first winter record of the Black-throated Blue Warbler at sapsucker wells with notes on other Midwest and Mid-Canada winter records

By David B. Johnson

On the morning of 27 December 2011, I was on my way to work in downtown Chicago, Illinois. I had taken an alternate route just east of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park at the north end of Grant Park, Cook County. I took this route to search for the Harris's Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) that Robert Hughes had observed on 23 December 2011 in front of the Aon Building on Randolph Street east of Michigan Avenue. On my way I heard several White-throated Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and while at the sidewalk next to the McDonald's Cyclery Center at 239 E. Randolph Drive I heard another White-throated Sparrow under a juniper along with some House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). I pushed toward the juniper and amazingly out flew a male Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*), feeding on the ground with the sparrows. Later the warbler flew to one of three trees next to the sidewalk where I noticed sapsucker drill holes were being used by the warbler to obtain food from sap. Soon I also saw an immature male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) on the other side of the tree. I couldn't believe it! I studied the Black-throated Blue Warbler for 10 minutes and, after taking some field notes, I posted the sighting on IBET (email list: IL Birders Exchanging Thoughts) with my Iphone. Then, I rushed across Randolph Drive where, almost immediately, I ran into Robert Hughes and told him of the news. Most importantly Robert had a camera! We raced back across Randolph Street whereupon Bob began to capture images of the warbler on one of the trees. We, then, had photographic documentation of this extremely rare winter warbler sighting just two days after Christmas.

Subsequently, for just over two weeks, at least 50 observers were able to see this rare wintering warbler. Bob Andrini took photographs of both the warbler and sapsucker on 5 January 2012; the photographs are published in Illinois Audubon (Andrini 2012). During one of my early afternoon visits on 6 January 2012, I witnessed at least 22 birders and photographers at the 239 East Randolph Drive site watching and photographing the warbler. The next day the warbler's presence made a bit of media frenzy when both a link to a video (Bzdak 2012) of the warbler at Millennium Park and an article (DeVore 2012) appeared in the Chicago Tribune's Saturday paper. More birders, photographers and passers-by came to view the rare warbler. To my knowledge, Lisa Rest and I were the last to observe the warbler just before and during the beginning of a snowstorm on 12 January 2012. Despite extensive searching for several days the warbler was never found again though the sapsucker lingered until 16 January 2012.

Prior to this winter record the latest fall date for Illinois was 27 November 2009, a male photographed by Gail L. Sadock in Grant Park, Chicago, Cook Co. (Paul Clyne pers. comm.). Bohlen (1989) has listed 14 November, a male in Champaign Co., for the latest departure date for the state.

Identification

Upon first observing the warbler I was immediately struck by cobalt blue dorsal surfaces of the warbler's back, nape and crown feathers; the long black flanks extending up to the black chin and throat; black in the face contrasting with the very white ventral breast, belly, vent and undertail coverts. The distinctive white square on the black wings

was noted along with a white edge to the folded wing. The warbler's soft parts included a black eye, thin pointed blackish bill and darkish-fleshy colored legs and feet. Later photographs would reveal a greenish tinge to the cobalt blue back feathers that first year males have (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Pyle et al. 1997). This feature is shown well on the Chicago Tribune video (Bzdak 2012) and other photographs.

Feeding and Interaction with an Immature male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

During the Black-throated Blue Warbler's stay at Millennium Park from 27 December 2011 through 12 January 2012, the warbler was most often seen in association with an immature Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at drill holes, feeding on the rows of fresh oozing sap at a hybrid 'Homestead' elm tree, though often the warbler would get chased off by the sapsucker. Holmes (2005) makes no specific mention of Black-throated Blue Warblers feeding on/at sapsucker wells, though this species feeding habits have been studied extensively during the breeding season. However, as noticed with the Millennium Park bird, Black-throated Blue Warblers routinely feed (on insects) by hover-gleaning, and will do so, especially on their wintering grounds while occasionally feeding on small fruits and flower nectar, as well as sugar-water at hummingbird feeders and frequently on honeydew excreted by scale insects on *Bursera simaruba* (gumbo-limbo) trees in Hispaniola (Latta et al. 2001). Mousley (1917) does mention an instance of a female Black-throated Blue Warbler that he watched, apparently in Quebec, on 16 October 1916 (his latest record for the species there), hover gleaning