

## Breeding Confirmation

# Two Mourning Warbler pairs breed at Illinois Beach State Park, Lake County



*Male Mourning Warbler, one of two breeding pairs at Illinois Beach State Park, Lake County. 13 July 2002. Photo by Eric Walters.*

by Eric Walters

While doing my summer breeding survey at the north unit of Illinois Beach State Park in early August 2002, I observed many interesting species including American Woodcock, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Alder Flycatcher, Sedge and Marsh Wrens, Veery, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Swamp Sparrows and a host of warblers including an unexpected Chestnut-sided and Black-and-white Warbler as well as Ovenbird and American Redstart. Despite this intriguing variety, I still had not confirmed breeding for either of the two Mourning Warbler (*Oporornis philadelphia*) territories I had mapped out during the survey. By 3 August, I was resigned to the idea that any breeding attempt had failed and that the two pairs were merely staying the balance of the summer at this site. But as I played back my prior audiotaped sessions of one of the singing males, I heard a sound unlike any other I had heard that summer. In due time, a juvenile Mourning Warbler appeared and nest success was confirmed. On 10 August, this young bird was heard again. As I left this territory and entered the other established Mourning Warbler territory, I observed for the first time a juvenile male (with no tail yet) foraging in the low brush. A second successful breeding confirmation!

This second confirmation was actually the first territory I located, being noted since 22 June. It wasn't until I took audiotape of this singing male and played it more than 50 yards away did I uncover a second male defending territory against my tape-recorded interloper. By standing in what appeared the boundary line between territories, I could replay my tape recording and get a quick response from both males, volleying their songs back and forth across the open woods. This second territory was first observed on 4 July, but both were likely present since around mid-June.

It's quite possible Mourning Warblers have been attempting to breed here for a number of years. In 2001, another observer heard a male Mourning Warbler singing in the vicinity during the middle of June. Furthermore, the habitat would be inviting with its moist substrate and abundance of jewelweed, golden-rods, tiger lilies and ferns. Mourning Warbler nests can be difficult to find; at least that was true for me. I followed the female of one territory during the 2002 breeding season, and more than once noted her dropping down into the vegetation, only to lose track of her after exploring the exact location. One researcher notes that females land significantly far from the actual nest site, 30-50 feet away, and silently creep through vegetation to approach their nest (Harrison 1975).

This would be Illinois' 10th and 11th confirmed breeding attempts for Mourning Warbler, the first since 1985. Eight prior breeding attempts were from northern Lake County between 1962-85 and the single record from Cook was in 1935 (Ford 1956, Bohlen 1989, Mlodinow 1984).

### Literature Cited

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- Harrison, H. H. 1975. *A Field Guide to the Bird's Nests*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 256 pp.
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