

to mind as a bird that might be seen in December, and Verdin came to mind as a bird with a gray body and yellow head. I continued chasing the bird around the pine trees getting additional views. Finally, the bird stationed itself in a tall spruce tree. It spent considerable time in this tree, deep within the center. I ended up grabbing on to the trunk of the tree and staring straight up just to get a glimpse of the bird gleaning high in the top portion of the spruce. Although these views were the worst I obtained of the overall bird, I was able to get excellent looks at the tail pattern. I quickly took notes on the bird and sketched the tail pattern when I returned to the car. After consulting the field guides I ruled out Verdin, then Pine Warbler, and eventually came to Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*). That was the bird!

Excited, I quickly posted my find on IBET, the on-line list service for Illinois birders, full well-knowing that interrogating replies would soon follow. Arriving home after school on 9 December, I was relieved to get a message on the answering machine from Bob Fisher confirming the sighting. Numerous other posts soon followed as others were able to relocate the bird.

As its name suggests, the Hermit Warbler is not easy to see. Even trips to its normal breeding grounds along the west coast are often unsuccessful in producing a sighting of the “shy” species that lives in the crowns of coniferous trees, dropping down only occasionally (Harrison 1984). Despite being seen by numerous Illinois birders, the Hermit Warbler was often a challenge to find, and many birders had to make numerous attempts before seeing the bird. Nonetheless, the Hermit Warbler continued to be seen at the Morton Arboretum well into January. The last report came sometime around 7 January, and a long cold spell in mid-January led many to believe that the bird may have died from the cold and a lack of food.

The bird was seen associating



*Hermit Warbler at Morton Arboretum, DuPage County. First state record. Photo taken in the winter 2002/2003 season by Jeff McCoy.*

with the Black-capped Chickadees on many occasions. It also regularly ventured off on its own. The Hermit Warbler fed on a number of insects and bugs that were still present during winter. It often plucked bugs out of pine cones and from crevasses in the bark. Most of the time the bird was seen deep in the evergreen trees, but it also briefly came out and fed in the open. The bird became increasingly difficult to see as the winter progressed. This combined with a slow decrease in the number of birders looking for the warbler, may have led to the drop in reports. This hypothesis was supported when a Morton Arboretum class led by Denis Kania, reported getting brief looks at the Hermit Warbler 2 February 2003. If the bird was still present that day, it may have survived the winter, which became less severe in later months, but its fate remains unknown.

Many birders wondered how long the Hermit Warbler was present at the Morton Arboretum. Most, including myself, believe the Hermit Warbler was present at the Arboretum for a considerable amount of time prior to the initial 8 December sighting. It may have arrived during late fall migration. One thing was clear. This bird was far off course from its normal breeding range, which primarily encompasses California, western Oregon, and western Washington. It is even farther away from its typical wintering grounds in Mexico and Central

America. However, wintering birds are also regularly seen along the California coast and rarely into portions of Oregon (Dunn and Garret 1997). It is unclear why this bird was driven so far off course, but it is clearly evident why it ended up at the Morton Arboretum. The area where the bird was seen, west of Frost Hill, is almost entirely comprised of coniferous trees including many pine and spruce trees as well as some hemlocks, junipers, and other dwarf evergreen shrubs. Hermit Warblers are also often attracted to the call of a Northern Saw-whet Owl (Griscom and Sprunt 1957). Coincidentally or not, a saw-whet owl roosts regularly in a pine tree adjacent to the area where the Hermit Warbler was usually seen at the Morton Arboretum.

The bird's origin was questioned further when it was learned that a second Hermit Warbler was seen in New York a week earlier. The New York bird was present near Jones Beach State Park in Nassau County, New York from 28 November through 1 December 2003. Some birders wondered whether the Hermit Warblers seen in New York and Illinois were in fact the same bird. Comparison of the Morton Arboretum bird with photos of the one in New York proved that they were two different birds. The New York bird had notable black markings on the throat and breast as well as a bit of streaking on the sides. It also had a faint yellow wash on the breast and had a greener head and back. All of these features led many to debate whether or not the New York Hermit Warbler was a Hermit/Townsend's hybrid (Eckert 2001).

### Age and sex

Another question arose regarding the bird's age and sex. Advice obtained from Sievert Rohwer, Curator of Birds at the University of Washington's Burke Museum, appears to clear up the issue regarding age, but not gender. Rohwer has co-written multiple articles about hybridization between Hermit Warblers and Townsend's Warblers