

Don't Forget the Birds



A Photo's Better Than a Thousand Words

by Ed Swan

The web and digital cameras continue to be a great contributor to the growth of birding knowledge. This proved itself again in July when Islander Michael Elenko sent a photo of a MacGillivray's Warbler to fellow Islander Richard Rogers, graphic designer/web designer, photographer and birder. Michael put the photo on his website with a question as to what it was as well. One responder told him it might be a Connecticut Warbler, in the same genus and very similar and also with no records for Washington State. If you know the birding community, you'll know a rare bird like that can set off an avalanche of activity to find and verify the bird. Through a series of emails, we got fairly definitive analysis of the bird as a MacGillivray's Warbler, still interesting, but no need to set off the rare bird alert.

In the old days, the original finder would call or use snail mail to get the word out on their sighting and might not have caught the needed field marks for listeners to know for sure what the bird was. A lot of people would stop there and write the sighting off because by the time a follow up observation could be attempted, the bird would usually be gone.

Instead Michael sent a photo to Richard in the morning, it eventually got to me in the late afternoon and I passed it on to receive opinions of which I had several within the hour. Richard knew right away it was likely a MacGillivray's Warbler because he maintains the Vashon checklist on the Vashon Audubon website at www.vashonaudubon.org. But when he sent it Alan Huggins (a birding class leader for Vashon Audubon) to confirm, Alan thought, "are those feathers sticking out the down of a first year bird or just a newly fledged adult?" MacGillivray's Warblers show up in spring and fall migration on Vashon and though the Island possesses several tantalizing records for June, in breeding season, no definitive nesting evidence exists. It would be very nice to have some proof that they do in fact breed here.

Alan sent the photo on to Gary Shugart, Islander and ornithologist at the Slater Museum of Natural History at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma. I sent it on to Don Norman with the Puget Sound Bird Observatory who forwarded it on to Dan Froehlich who according to Don, "know his feathers." They took a look at the photo and came up with these opinions:

Don Norman: "It does look like a MGWA. They will molt into their 1st pre-basic (formative) plumage in the nest or shortly after, so it is likely a local bird. I've cc'd Dan to get a confirmation of the last remaining juvenile feather popping out. Sure looks like down to me."

Gary Shugart: "The poofy feathers are breast feathers that stick out when the wings are tucked tightly into the 'pockets'. The Burke museum's Sievert Rohwer typically puffs these out on skins - hence his name for round skins - puffers or puffer bellies. If down remained it would be on the head and there is supposed to be, although inadequately described, molt of body feathers into first basic (=formative) plumage between fledging and August. The plumage look rather fresh so it could be a first basic (=formative) plumage bird of the year or an extremely early molting adult."

Dan Froehlich: "Cool pic, but the bird has already completed its preformative molt and none of the



A MacGillivray's Warbler in freshly molted plumage, photo by Michael Elenko.

feathers are juvenile feathers, as far as I can see. When they poof out their flank feathers over the wings, you get a fluffy effect because the wings push those flank feathers out

7th Annual Fur Ball Auction

Saturday, August 8, 2009
5:30-10pm

"O" Open Space
 for Arts & Community

Sponsored by:
 Barbara Drinkwater • Annie Miksh
 Karen Hust & Todd Vogel • Palouse Winery
 J.R. Crawford, Realtor of John L. Scott
 Michelle & Scott Harvey • Mike & Marlene Rossi
 Emma Amiad of Amiad & Assoc.
 Joyce Olson • Sue Carette of Windemere
 Vashon Island Golf & Country Club
 Fair Isle Animal Clinic • Terri & Geoff Fletcher

Tickets \$25 • On sale now at Fair Isle Animal Clinic,
 Pandora's Box, Vashon Bookshop and Books by the Way

www.vipp.org • 206.463.2268

a bit, as in this bird's posture. MacGillivray's spend so little time in their juv plumage that the feather barbs are remarkably loose and don't form vanes; they would look much fluffier than this individual. So, sorry to spoil the speculation, but I would be highly dubious about any claim for local breeding based just on the bird in this picture!"

So this photo gave the opportunity to send this record out to experts who gave us a lot of information back in a short period of time. Breeding status for MacGillivray's remains unconfirmed but a photo like this will be what helps make the definitive evidence if it ever happens.

This photo looks very nice in black and white and even prettier in color, catching the grays and yellow of the MacGillivray's well. However, a photo needn't be so professionally done to be helpful for recording important ornithological

data. Take photos when you have a chance and share. If you have an interesting photo or sighting or a question about local birds, call me at 463-7976 or email at edswan@centurytel.net.

If you'd be interested in a guided bird tour of Vashon or an off-Island trip for ptarmigan on Mt. Rainier or down to the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge for returning birds, contact me as listed above. I also do home visits to help identify birds in your yard and provide suggestions for attracting more birds and species diversity. For details contact me or visit my website: www.theswancompany.com.

Island Birding Guide
 Tours to the best Vashon and Puget Sound bird spots
 Species Identification
 How to Attract Birds
 Ed Swan
 (206) 463-7976

