

Chasing the Chat

The yellow-breasted chat is described in various ornithological tomes and field guides as an infrequent and irregular summer visitor in Massachusetts. It is a catbird-sized creature with a yellow breast and a mockingbirdlike song and, as far as habitat is concerned, it favors catbrier thickets and patches of dense undergrowth. Although it is rarely actually seen in Massachusetts, it nests from the Cape and the southern part of the state all the way north to the Berkshires, and sometimes even spends the winter here.

But where exactly does one find this elusive chat and how would one go about actually seeing it?

On an otherwise normal day back in 1995, I was drifting down the Nissitissit River in southern New Hampshire, not thinking of anything very much at all save the languorous beauties of a June day and the pleasures of the coming summer, when I heard a sad little warbling and mewling emanating from a brushy meadow on the left bank. I thought it was a mockingbird at first and then remembered a line from one of the many bird identification books describing the song of the furtive chat. I sat up abruptly and looked over my shoulder as the bird warbled on and the river carried me off.

Not to be outfoxed by mere downstream currents, I back paddled and steered the boat toward the shore, intending to land and find the singer. By that point the river had narrowed, the current increased, and before I could make the turn the bow was swept downstream again. No matter; I paddled hard on the port side to reach quieter water on the right bank to paddle upstream and try again. But in midriver the current increased once more and carried me toward a huge rock, festooned with deadly tree snags. More hard paddling, the canoe listing and almost shipping water, whereupon a small, energetic dog I had with me either fell overboard in his excitement or decided it was time for a swim and began a furious dog-paddle for the right bank, all the while sweeping downstream. I turned the boat again, skirted the rock with its armor of deadly snags, made the shore on the right bank, retrieved the dog, and then carried on downstream.

But no chat.

That was in June. In July that same year, I was on the north shore of Martha's Vineyard walking along on the Rock Bight Trail, not thinking of chats, or much else for that matter. At one point the trail I was following broke out from the oak scrub and passed through an open glade of blueberry, thickets of catbrier, and low brush. There it was again, the sweet low chattering and whistling.

I squinted into the thicket and moved toward the sound. Something fluttered in the thickets, and I stepped deeper into the greenwood tangle and waited. Silence. Only the sound of the field crickets and the dull thud of the waves down on the beach. The bird began to chatter again and I pursued more vigorously—much scratched by catbrier, poison ivy all around me, disease-bearing ticks abounding. Then I saw a shadowy form spirit off and drop down into a hollow well beyond a high impenetrable wall of catbrier.

No chat.

All this occurred at the end of a much longer quest. Earlier, maybe even ten years earlier, in Old Lyme, Connecticut, not far from the riverbank home of the famous Roger Tory Peterson himself, my brother and I were walking toward the shore through an apparently deserted old field. At one point, I saw a yellowish bird rise up out of the brush, its legs suspended, and then drop down into the thickets again. Here I was in the very heartland of Lyme disease, barelegged and hot, ticks, mosquitoes, poison ivy, and catbrier everywhere. Undeterred, I gave chase; yet to no avail the bird had disappeared.

As I threaded my way back toward my brother, there came a hideous roaring and I saw a sweating baboonlike man with a red face and red bandana headband just emerging from a battered jeep, already cursing my brother mightily and informing him in no uncertain terms that this was private property and that my brother and his type (not sure what his type was exactly) should get the hell out and stay off his private land or he would hold us until the police arrived. My thought was to hide in the thickets and let my brother take the fall. But the enraged landowner spotted me and started shouting again, pointing at me aggressively. I tried to assuage him with a stuttering nerdy explanation of my

plight, that is to say, my lifelong desire to observe the elusive and rare bird called the yellow-breasted chat—a *rara avis* indeed, otherwise known, in the Linnaean system of nomenclature, as *Icteria virens*. This managed to disarm him briefly, and we were permitted to exit his property without a police escort.

But still no chat.



And so it went, year after year. A dog attack in Westport. Lost in the thickets of Chatham. A strange encounter with another offended landowner who actually took an interest in my quest and insisted on showing me all the improvements he was making to his newly acquired holdings (which in the eyes of an environmentalist were no improvements at all). And on one occasion, as I was emerging from reservoir land in southeastern Connecticut, a police

interrogation. Why was I there on land that was clearly marked off-limits? And my car illegally parked to boot? I explained that I was taking part in a national survey of a certain species of nesting bird known as the yellow-breasted chat. (Not exactly true, but mostly true—this was my own private survey and I had so far ranged from southern New Hampshire to Florida in my search.) This, I was informed, did not excuse me from walking on private holdings without written permission. Once again I was released with a mere warning.

And then finally, again, on the Nissitissit, one year ago. The same slow drift, the same meadow, the same warbling song, and, just before the current caught me, a yellow bird rose out of the brush, flitted off in a lilting flight, legs dangling in the style of chats, and dropped down again just before the river bore me away.

But was it in fact a chat? Such fleeting confirmation, so brief a showing for such an elusive a bird. Inadmissible evidence in any court of law.

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