

NOTES AND LETTERS

POSSIBLE BREEDING NORTHERN PARULAS IN CENTRAL WESTERN MANITOBA

The Northern Parula is an eastern North American wood-warbler that approaches its northwestern range limit in southeastern Manitoba (Fig. 1). Detection of this species in the breeding season is facilitated by its distinctive buzzy songs and its preference for nesting in conspicuous arboreal lichens of the genus *Usnea*.⁶ It is locally quite common in Whiteshell and Nopiming Provincial Parks (PP), east and southeast of the south basin of Lake Winnipeg, and also occurs on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg in and near Hecla/Grindstone PP.^{4,6,9} This note documents observations of possible breeding farther north and

west. Records are described in the order of the five numbered sites mapped in Fig. 1.

Observations

Site 1—On 13 June 1998, a visiting birder from California found a singing Northern Parula along Hwy 60, 36.2 km west of Hwy 6 and 13 km west of the Kaweenakumik (formerly Kawinaw) Lake access road (B. Siegel, pers. comm.). She noted that much *Usnea* lichen was present, and the bird appeared to be looking for a nest site. I have made numerous stops in this general area between 1991 and 2009, specifically

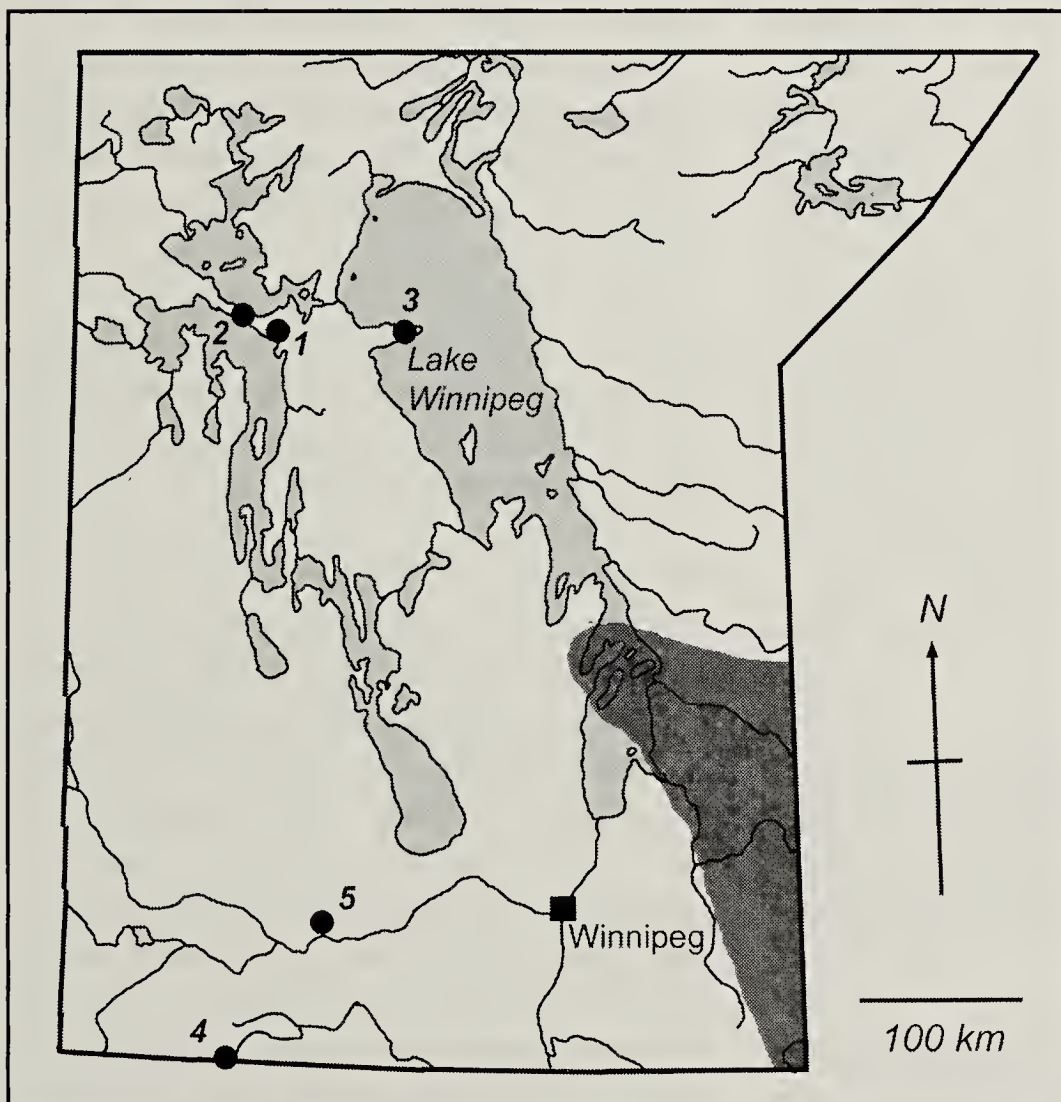


Figure 1. Southern Manitoba, showing the known breeding range of Northern Parulas (based on References 6 and 9) and the localities discussed in the text.



Figure 2. Possible breeding habitat for Northern Parulas north of Lake Winnipegosis, MB (Site 2). The inset shows detail of arboreal lichens (presumed *Usnea*).

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listening for Parulas at sites with plentiful *Usnea*, without success.

Site 2—On 28 June 2007, I heard a singing male at an ideal-looking stand of mixed-wood forest, with abundant *Usnea* on dead and dying conifers (Fig. 2), alongside Hwy 60 north of Lake Winnipegosis, about 50 km west of Hwy 6 ($52^{\circ} 58.26' N$, $99^{\circ} 53.28' W$). Two were singing about 150 m apart at the same site on 23 June 2008, but none was heard under good conditions, with many other warblers singing, on 12 and 14 June 2009.

Site 3—On 25 June 2008, the distinctive song of a Northern Parula was heard near the east end of the Long Point road (R. Mooi, Curator of Zoology at The Manitoba Museum, pers. comm.).

Site 4—On 26 June 1981, three Northern Parulas were reported singing at the International Peace Gardens, at the

Manitoba–North Dakota border in the Turtle Mountain region (D. Dupre, pers. comm.); one was heard there the following day by two birders then resident in Winnipeg (W. Neily, J. Zoch, pers. comm.).⁶

Site 5—On 24 June 2000, a singing male was observed along the Epinette Trail in Spruce Woods PP, south of Carberry (L. Blanchette, pers. comm.).

Discussion

The observations at Sites 1 to 3 suggest that Northern Parulas may breed, sparsely and irregularly, in suitable habitat near $53^{\circ} N$ in central western Manitoba. While nesting was not confirmed, the records meet the criteria for “possible breeding” used in bird atlases.^{e.g. 5,8} The International Peace Gardens and Spruce Woods records are more difficult to categorize, but perhaps they represent non-breeding summer visitors as opposed to possible breeders.

A similar distinction was made by Smith in assessing summer records of Northern Parulas in Saskatchewan.⁸ It should be noted, however, that Northern Parulas have bred occasionally as far from their normal range as coastal California.^{1,7}

Two other extralimital summer records are unlikely to represent breeding localities. A mid-June 1987 sighting by several observers at Churchill (about 500 km north of the region mapped in Fig. 1) was probably well north of potential breeding habitat.² Two Northern Parulas, one of them singing, were found on 8 July 2009 in Winnipeg, where the species is a rare migrant.³ Koes thought them most likely to be failed breeders that had wandered from their normal range.³

In combination with possible breeding records in Saskatchewan, and north of the main breeding range in Ontario, the observations at Sites 1 to 3 suggest that breeding may occur, albeit sparsely, in parts of the boreal forest well beyond the commonly published range limits.^{5,8} The main breeding range in Ontario lies across the Precambrian Shield and is contiguous with the Manitoba range (Fig. 1), but there are scattered records of singing males northward to the Hudson Bay lowlands.⁵ Of 24 records mapped in the *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*, four were classed as possible breeding; these involved singing males in summer in the southern boreal region, at Hanson Lake Road, Emma Lake, Red Earth, and Duck Mountain, all in the eastern half of the province.⁸ As noted above, several other Saskatchewan records were classified as summer visitants.⁸

The strong association with *Usnea* lichen may tend to concentrate migrant Northern Parulas that have overshot their normal breeding range in spring, and improve their chances of extralimital breeding, as well as highlighting promising

habitat for passing birders. Perhaps the *Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas*, a 5-year project that was initiated in spring of 2010, will yield a clearer picture of the Northern Parula's status in inaccessible, forested regions of central and western Manitoba. Further information on this project is available at <http://birdatlas.mb.ca> or from Christian Artuso, Box 24 – 200 Saulteaux Crescent, Winnipeg, MB, R3J 3W3.

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