

THE DISCOVERY OF THE ELFIN WOODS WARBLER -- AN INSIDE LOOK

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The ornithological community, especially the experts on the birds of the West Indies, suffered a major shock with the announcement in 1972 of a new species of warbler from Puerto Rico. This bird, the Elfin Woods Warbler, was the first new species to have been described from the West Indies since 1927, and the first from Puerto Rico in the Twentieth Century. The formal description of *Dendroica angelae* Kepler and Parkes appeared in *The Auk*, vol. 89. That paper, based on the combined expertise of a Puerto Rico-based field ecologist and a taxonomist long interested in the Parulidae, was exceptionally thorough in its analysis of the habitat and the relationship of the new warbler. But, as is almost always the case, the formal *Auk* paper omitted much of the background of this discovery, many details of which would have been out of place in a formal scientific journal. I have been encouraged by my Puerto Rican colleagues to go on record with some of the anecdotes about incidents connected with the discovery, collection of specimens, and publication of the Elfin Woods Warbler.

I had known Cam and Kay Kepler for some years before they began their respective studies of the Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*) and the Puerto Rican Tody (*Todus mexicanus*). They urged me to visit them at their new home in the Luquillo Experimental Forest, and in March 1971 my wife and I were able to go to Puerto Rico for our vacation. While we were with the Keplers, they told us about some little birds that they had been noticing that did not seem to be in any of the books on West Indian birds. They had sent a description of these birds to James Bond, who suggested that they may have been stray Black-throated Gray Warblers (*Dendroica nigrescens*) from western North America. Bond would not consider the possibility of an unknown species in Puerto Rico. Having understandably rejected Bond's tentative identification, the Keplers felt that there were several reasons, including year-round observations, to consider that these warblers might belong to an endemic breeding population, and possibly (though most improbably) a new species. As a non-taxonomist, it had also occurred to Cam that they might represent an isolated population of some species known from elsewhere in the New World tropics; there is precedent for such a distribution in, for example, the Hispaniolan population of the Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*). Kay, who is an excellent artist, showed me a sketch she had made of the mystery bird. I replied

Discovery of the Elfin Woods Warbler (continued)

immediately that I could tell them two things about their warbler: it was a species entirely unknown to science, and that its nearest relative was the Arrow-headed Warbler (*Dendroica pharetra*) of the Jamaican highlands. We went out to one of the areas where the Keplers had encountered these birds, but it was a gloomy, foggy March day, and the birds were not singing. Cam and I agreed that it was vitally necessary to secure one or more specimens in order to write a formal description of the new species, and he promised to send me progress reports.

For the next couple of months, "progress" was perhaps not the appropriate word to use. Cam had no collecting gun, so he wrote to Washington, D.C., to his employers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, requesting that a gun be sent to him. He received the gun fairly promptly, but discovered that it had no firing pin. So he wrote to Washington again. Back came a firing pin -- the wrong size! So, understandably impatient, Cam borrowed a pellet gun, and on 18 May 1971 he collected the first specimen of the bird we had already agreed to call *Dendroica angelae* for Kay, whose full name is Angela Kay Kepler. Cam wrote me that he wasn't very good at making bird skins, and planned to take or to send the frozen specimen to Washington, to have a proper skin made by the legendary Roxie Laybourne. I wrote back to say that it wasn't such a good idea to haul this unique bird all over the place, and suggested that he keep it in the freezer until I could get back to Puerto Rico. I could then do the detailed description necessary for our planned paper, and prepare the skin myself.

Thanks to the Edward O'Neil Fund of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, I flew to Puerto Rico that July. At the Kepler's house, I thawed out the warbler specimen. It was soaking wet, so I spent the next hour or so drying and fluffing up the plumage with hot cornmeal, keeping a pan on the stove to replenish the cornmeal as it got soggy.

After I had written a detailed description of the complicated plumage pattern, I was faced with the problem of the preparation of the study skin. I had discovered that the pellet that had brought the bird down had opened a great hole in the lower back. Normally I would begin skinning a bird by making an incision down the length of its belly. Had I done this with the warbler, however, I would have ended up with two strips of skin, thanks to the big hole already present on the back. So I decided to skin out the bird *through* the shot hole. This meant, in effect, encountering the bird's anatomy in a reverse sequence. I had prepared waterfowl skins with a dorsal incision, but never as small a bird as a warbler.

Cam Kepler has reminded me that while I was working on the specimen, I wandered into another room and said, in an awestruck tone, "Just think,

I'm the only person in the world who has ever had Elfin Woods Warbler fat under my fingernails!"

Fortunately the skinning went well, and the gap in the back of the specimen is concealed by the folded wings. But the pellet had also completely smashed the bird's pelvic area, and I was unable to find any trace of the gonads. Cam was sure it was a male, because before he shot it he had seen it singing from a series of song perches. I thought it undesirable for the type specimen of a new species to be a bird whose sex had not been verified anatomically. Cam, who had not previously been involved in taxonomic descriptions, was under the impression that the first specimen actually collected was automatically the type specimen. I reassured him on this point, and suggested that we hike up to the elfin woods and collect another specimen, this time with more appropriate ammunition for a tiny bird. This we did, luckily getting both an adult and a young bird in the greenish "immature" (= first basic) plumage.

Back at the Keplers' house, I wrote a detailed description of the adult, which I could verify as a male, noting some minor differences from the first specimen. I had to do this before preparing the study skin, as some of the complex pattern of *Dendroica angelae* is concealed or somewhat distorted in a museum specimen. Next I turned to the young bird. We had had to arise at something like 3 AM to be able to get to the elfin woods habitat by dawn, and I was exhausted. I found myself preparing the skin of the young bird almost in my sleep, having had enough experience in this technique to do it almost as a series of reflexes. When finished, I realized to my horror that thanks to my fatigue, I had completely overlooked the necessity of writing the plumage description before skinning the bird. I apologized to Cam, and told him we would have to go back and get another young bird. He is, fortunately, a patient and tolerant individual, and we repeated our trip up the mountain and did indeed collect another of the green-plumaged birds. Our respective talents combined well during this adventure, as Cam is a better shot than I am, but wasn't happy about his skinning abilities. Thus, the first four specimens of *Dendroica angelae* were all collected by Cameron Kepler and prepared by me.

The second young bird, which proved to be a male, was duly written up, and a good specimen made of it while I was reasonably awake. It and the second adult, which became the type specimen, were deposited in the United States National Museum, and Carnegie Museum of Natural History houses the 18 May male and the first immature bird, a female. The conformation of the study skin of that young bird is a constant reminder of my having prepared it in my sleep!

The late Oliver L. Austin, Jr., was the Editor of *The Auk* at that time. He was excited by our

paper, and was able to get the consent of the author scheduled to have the lead article in the next available issue (January 1972) postponed to make room for the *Dendroica angelae* bombshell. I telephoned my friend Don Eckelberry, who had previously done a painting for me for a frontispiece to accompany a journal paper, and asked him whether he would like to do a painting of a new species. Don was not enthusiastic, as he knew that I was heavily involved with studies on Philippine birds (as I am still), and he thought I meant a new Philippine species. When I explained that this was a bird from Puerto Rico, he perked up immediately. I knew already that Don didn't like to paint any bird that he had not seen alive himself (or at least seen a closely related species). I urged him to try to get down to Puerto Rico and see the Elfin Woods Warbler himself. He was able to arrange to take a few days in his busy schedule and join Cam and Kay Kepler in the field. He made sketches of the warbler and of the plants in its habitat, and painted the fine portrait that appeared as the frontispiece in the January 1972 *Auk*. Some years later Don generously presented the original painting to the Keplers.

Unfortunately, in the haste necessary to get the journal issue out promptly, there was not adequate time to allow the artist to see the color proofs. In the reproduction of the frontispiece the contrast was set too high, so that the pattern of the lower figure, the immature bird, stands out too boldly, whereas the actual markings of this plumage are relatively subtle. We also found three typographical errors, and after checking up, Cam found that the blame for these could be allotted evenly: he, I, and the Editor were each responsible for one error.

It is difficult to believe that almost twenty years have elapsed since the discovery of the Elfin Woods Warbler. I treasure the memory of this adventure that the Keplers allowed me to share. I will probably never again experience the eerie feeling of standing under a tree watching a family group of birds that, as far as the world of ornithology was concerned, did not exist!

**SECOND RECORD OF BAIRD'S
SANDPIPER (*CALIDRIS BAIRDII*) FOR
TRINIDAD, WITH NOTES ON ITS
OCCURRENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN
BASIN**

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A Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) in juvenal plumage was observed on 17 November 1989 at the Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, wastewater treatment ponds (10°23'N, 61°09'W), inland approximately 1.6 km from the Gulf of Paria, by six members of a