

Audubon versus Zoar? The Black-Throated Blue Warbler as Decoy

by: Jean Dickson, January 2025

Q: When is a bird not a bird? A: When it is nothing but a puppet.

The Black-Throated Blue Warbler is a small songbird that breeds here in Western New York. The adult male has striking blue, black and white plumage; the female has olive green plumage with blue and white patches on wings. They raise one brood of three to five chicks per year. According to the Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State, they need “large tracts of relatively undisturbed hardwood and mixed forest, with a closed tree canopy and dense undergrowth that often contains hobblebush.” They feed primarily on insects and larvae, especially caterpillars, aka the “hamburgers of the forests,” and in the winter they migrate to the Caribbean. The Atlas continues: “Clear-cut logging on its breeding grounds negatively affects abundance of the species...[but] it is just as common in both managed and unmanaged northern hardwood forests... as long as there is a relatively complete canopy cover.”

Habitat loss is a major cause of decline: quantity and quality of habitat. Unfortunately, some of the public lands on which these and other forest birds rely for breeding, such as Zoar Valley and the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge are no longer well protected. They thrive in large forests unbroken by human development. Mature and old-growth forests host diverse wildlife and sequester carbon, slowing climate change. While warblers also need shrubs for feeding, mature forests should not be broken up for shrub land. Fragmented forests have “more predation, more parasitism, and less vertebrate diversity than intact habitats,” according to Eric Stiles, a former Audubon leader. The author of the chapter on the BTBW, Joan E. Collins, stresses the importance of closed tree canopy. She notes that in some areas of New York State, the numbers of these warblers have increased a little, probably because of the “continued forest maturation,” but decreased in the Adirondacks, probably due to “clear-cut logging, increased development, and wide edge-clearing along roadways.” But loss of breeding habitat is one of many dangers. Important threats also include loss of winter habitat in the Neotropics, where these warblers spend almost two-thirds of the year; loss of sites for rest and refreshment along migration routes; cats; window collisions; and climate change.

Suzanne Treyger, a spokesperson for NY Audubon, claims online that Zoar Valley has “little-to-no habitat diversity.” However, in emails obtained through Freedom of Information requests, she admits that Zoar Valley forests meet the definition of diverse habitat. NY/CT Audubon is planning a series of logging “harvests” in Zoar Valley’s Multiple Use Area. Like the unnamed U.S. Major who said, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it,” they support destruction of habitat to “save” birds. On their website they say they plan to create “early successional” (young) forest for forest birds, and claim that “young forest increases carbon sequestration, improves water filtration, reduces flooding, and is essential habitat...” This is not true.

Treyger even claims that “habitat restoration projects like this are essential” for reversing the decline of forest species. Local naturalist Wayne Gall calls this Audubon statement “deceitful and misleading.” Logging sections of Zoar Valley would do serious damage to the habitat: roads and clear-cuts invariably bring water run-off and contaminants to the soil, erosion, and invasive species. As Douglas Tallamy, author of Nature’s Best Hope, writes, “Old growth

forests hold more carbon than young (i.e., less than 120-year-old trees) forests, although young forests sequester it faster. But to cut down old growth, releasing a zillion tons of carbon to get a young forest in the name of climate change makes no sense.” Likewise, conservation biologist John Terborgh wrote that there is “no conservation reason for creating more early successional habitat.”

Although their online Fact Sheet announces that Zoar Valley will be a “demonstration site” for their “forest improvement treatments [they never use the word “logging”], it appears that the Audubon group has not done a scientific survey of wildlife at Zoar. Only an audio survey of bird species has been done, in 2024. As biologist Mark Pokras suggests, if it’s a “demonstration,” then scientific methods require careful measurement of “bird numbers and reproduction (maybe 3 to 5 years of detailed breeding bird surveys), invasive plants, rare plants, deer numbers, etc., for several years prior to the project –and then a detailed follow-up after the ‘demonstration’ harvest is accomplished.”

Why are the NY/CT Audubon enthusiastically supporting plans to log large sections of Zoar Valley? People who love Zoar want to know what’s in it for Audubon financially? It’s not immediately obvious. However, some government agencies and some conservationist organizations seem to have been coopted or even captured by industries and wealthy individuals who benefit from the exploitation of public lands. These Audubon groups benefit from the contracts they have with the USDA Forest Service and other non-profit big donors, contracts that involve logging. Audubon is involved in “experimental silviculture, including heavy use of slash walls to keep deer (and people) out of logged areas. This is inappropriate for public lands, and creates new fire risks.

For example, NY/CT Audubon (a group that does not include some New York State Audubon organizations, such as Buffalo Audubon Society) received over \$345,000 in 2022 under the rubric “habitat improvement” for the sake of warblers and other birds. National Audubon has received millions. NY/CT Audubon also have a “certified Audubon forester” program. Sean Mahar, the current acting head of the DEC, was formerly NY Audubon Director of Government Relations. At the very least, this joint effort looks like a conflict of interest, as well as a misguided initiative. Whose interests are DEC and CT/NY Audubon serving? The public’s? Or their own?

Birds and other creatures would benefit from additional diverse habitats unhindered by development, including shrub, swamp, grassland, oak savannah, and young forests, some of which already exist nearby in public lands, including large acreage owned and managed by the Nature Conservancy, a national organization, and the smaller acreage of the western New York Nature Sanctuary, and in privately owned land near Zoar Valley. If need be, some of these lands could be planted with native shrubs. Logging is not the answer! Famed Western New York artist Charles Burchfield painted Zoar Valley as a natural and spiritual cathedral over seventy years ago. May the “Big Woods” continue to support wildlife and inspire the next seven generations!

