

Morgan Mountain Birdwatch

By Catherine Sheard

The abrupt stop jolts me out of my stupor.

“Are we there?” I ask my father sleepily as he shuts off the engine. He nods and passes me a flashlight from his backpack. I yank on my hiking boots and sling my binoculars over my shoulder. It’s 2:00 AM, Saturday June 20, 2005, just a few days after my last day of ninth grade. My father and I are going to climb Morgan Mountain, in the northeast corner of the Adirondacks, and search for the elusive Bicknell’s Thrush.

There is nobody around for miles on this empty mountain road, although the frogs and insects are deafening. The stars are brilliant, but they are soon blocked by the trees as we disappear into a trailhead barely visible during the day, much less by flashlight.

The trail begins gently – it was once accessible to vehicles, and the path follows the imprints of the tire tracks. However, after about half a mile, the tracks disappear, and the trail becomes a rocky, overgrown track following, and sometimes merging with, a streambed. There has been a lot of rain; mud coats my boots and my jeans become soaked from rubbing against the brush. The trail quickly becomes steep, and negotiating a route in the dark without breaking an ankle becomes an event. To combat the eerie blackness of the woods, my father and I play words games and test each other’s knowledge of obscure bird species.

Slightly over two hours later, we reach a pond, across which is our first survey site. The previous year, a determined beaver had flooded part of the trail, so we are forced to

alter our route creatively. We arrive at the first point, a large, flat rock overlooking the pond, just as the sky begins to lighten. My father tosses me a granola bar and we get set up for the survey.

As if on cue, the frogs stop simultaneously. There is a few heartbeats’ worth of silence, which is pierced by a shrill “*Oh sweet Canada-Canada-Canada-Canada*” from across the lake. Our first bird of the morning is a White-throated Sparrow. Other birds quickly follow, leaving my father and me to sort out their identities and determine whether we’re hearing two different birds or one bird that merely moved.

By the time we complete the last site, the sun is shining brightly and the dawn chorus has ceased. We have heard or seen four of the five target species. There have been Winter Wrens, Blackpoll Warblers, White-throated Sparrows, and Swainson’s Thrushes aplenty. However, if there are Bicknell’s Thrushes on Morgan Mountain, they weren’t singing in front of two intruders on this morning. My father and I survey the sites again, but to no avail. We haven’t found the Bicknell’s Thrush.

But we’ll keep trying. This drab little bird cannot evade us for long. Someday, we will spot its subtle stripes or hear its magnificent trills. We will send in our data to help save the species, so that someday I can go hiking with my kids to look for a Bicknell’s Thrush.

Catherine Sheard is a sophomore at Hugh C. William High School in Canton, NY, where her favorite class is math. She has been birding with her parents all her life, but especially like hawks.