



Fig 1. Dirk Bay.
Scenic view of Dirk Bay, near Galley Head.
Photo: Richard T. Mills.

I'm Just Going to Check this Garden for an American Redstart . . . and I May be Some Time

by John Coveney

Introduction

At the time and 30 years on, 1985 stands as the best year for American passerines in Ireland and Britain. For me, it peaked on the weekend of the 12th and 13th of October when I found an American Redstart and also got a Scarlet Tanager and a Philadelphia Vireo. Although the Redstart was 'only' a second Irish, amazingly, it's the last twitchable European occurrence outside of the Azores!

Scarlet Saturday on the Beara Peninsula

After a period of unsettled westerly weather for the first ten days of October 1985, conditions had settled by the weekend of the 12th and 13th. On Saturday morning, in the company of my

then girlfriend*, I headed off from Cork to the Beara Peninsula.

The plan was to do some birding as well as showing her the scenery of Dursey Island via Ireland's only cable car. We had time for a brief stop at Firkeel where she, despite being a non-birder, found me a Red-breasted Flycatcher - a tick! She might be kept on!

Then we had to go catch the cable car. I felt slightly uneasy leaving the area without checking it fully . . . but I could do that on the way home and I wasn't aware of any other birders visiting the peninsula that day!

Dursey was pretty birdless, so as we returned over Dursey Sound on the afternoon cable-car, I was looking forward to getting back to Firkeel. As soon as we arrived, we met the late and much missed Willie McDowell accompanied by Dennis Weir - both from Belfast.

At the time, however, Willie was more of a birding rival than a friend and I was stunned when he gleefully told me of their find of a Scarlet Tanager - the second Irish record. It was great to see such a rarity but sickening to know that I left it after me earlier in the day!



Button A and Button B

Back in Cork later that evening, the day's news was being spread around on **button A** **button B** phone boxes – younger readers should be aware that you had to get into phone boxes to make calls – and tweeting was something for the birds!

These phones were dodgy at the best of times, and a brief call to Dennis O'Sullivan on Cape Clear Island was mainly occupied with details of the Scarlet Tanager. However, he did squeeze in a mention that Jim Dowdall might have seen a Philadelphia Vireo in 'Dirk Bay' near Galley Head – a section of the headland then unfamiliar to me.

Dennis was unsure of how certain the identification was but upon consideration I decided even if Jim only thought he had a first for the Western Palearctic, I was going! Dennis said he might see me on Galley Head as some stage on the Sunday if they succeeded in chartering the island ferry for an early morning departure to Firkeel – another first!

Fig 2 (top). Map of West Cork.

Routes taken and locations visited during the 12th & 13th of October 1985. Firkeel and Garinish (neither indicated on the map) are close to the Dursey Cable Car at the tip of the Beara Peninsula.

From: Google Maps.

Fig 3 (above). Dirk Bay, near Galley Head.

A view of Dirk Bay from seaward indicating the locations where the American Redstart (to the right) and the Philadelphia Vireo (to the left) were found in October 1985.

Photo: John Coveney.

Unknown to us, Jim Dowdall had confirmed the identification of the Philadelphia Vireo later that night but, when I phoned fellow Cork birder, Mark Shorten, to plan our trip to Galley Head, we decided that we would make sure of it in the event of any uncertainty.

So it was fairly late when I got to bed after checking the identification information I had to hand . . . and of course there was no internet in those days!



Figs 4 & 5. Philadelphia Vireo.

Philadelphia Vireo, Dirk Bay. October 1985. 1st Irish and 1st Western Palearctic record.

Both photos: Richard T. Mills.

A First for the Western Palearctic

It was another fine morning when Mark and I arrived on Galley Head about breakfast time the following day. We found Dirk Bay easily enough – left at the last cross roads about a mile back from the lighthouse and down the hill. But it still had to be checked out on the relevant sheet of Ordnance Survey Ireland's then current and not very accurate half inch maps . . . how did we ever manage without clickable directions?

When we arrived at the bottom of the hill, we found what appeared to be the correct large tree . . . and quickly got views of what looked just right for a Philadelphia Vireo flitting through the leaves . . . Wow! We stuck with it until late morning and got detailed notes to make sure there would be no doubt as to its identification. Yank no. 2 of the weekend for me!

I'm Going to Check this Garden for an American Redstart . . .

Eventually, we felt we could do no more with the Vireo and we looked around to see where else we should check.

Although there was a lot of cover in the woods nearby, there were no migrants of note and I said to Mark that we should go and 'check the garden at the top of the hill for an American Redstart' – a bird I had been raving about for a few autumns. I'm sure Mark groaned at the reappearance of this pipe dream!

Nonetheless, we hopped back on my trusty Honda 250cc and headed back up the hill. Once we were parked, Mark walked in along a track on the lower side of the garden and I hopped over a gate on the upper side. Just inside was a short thin hedge and the movement of bird close to me immediately caught my eye – a small passerine facing me with a dark head, a conspicuous white eye ring, and yellowy orange patches at the sides of the breast. Janey Mac† - it's a another yank – but which one??

Before I could even start getting my head together, it immediately turned and spread its tail to reveal large yellow patches at the sides!! I couldn't believe it – an American Redstart! OH FLIP†. But how was I to get Mark on to it? It was so close to me that I was afraid to call him from the other side of the garden and out of my sight. The best I could do was strangulated shout-whisper:-

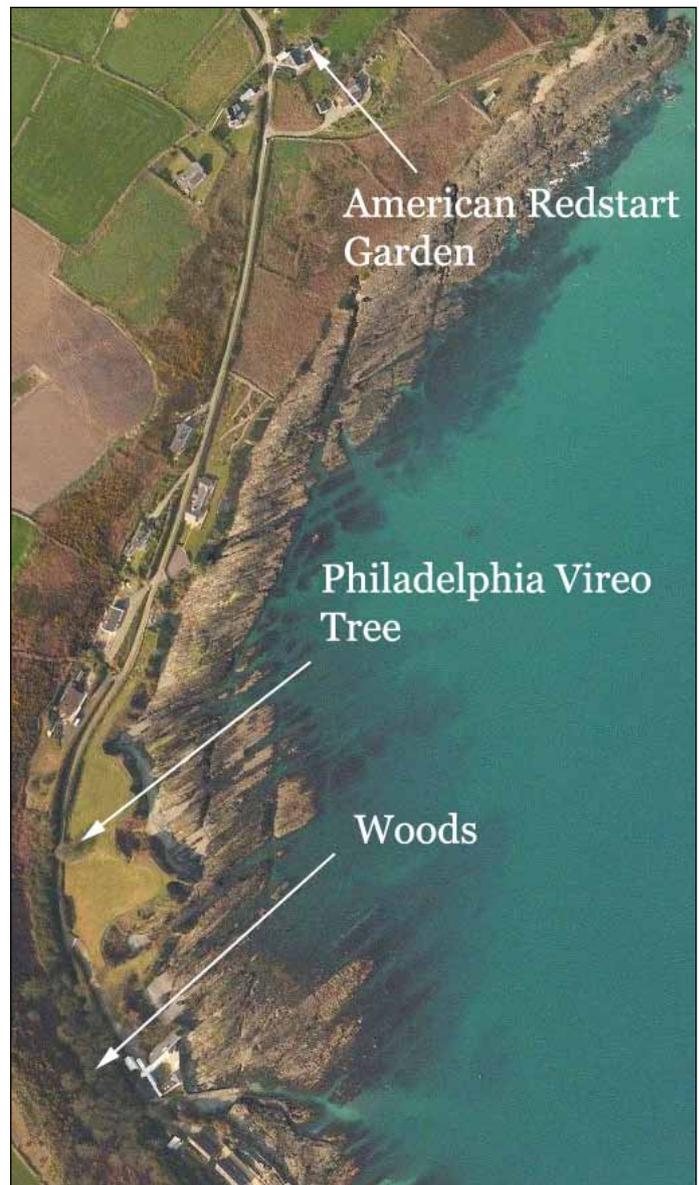


Fig 6. Dirk Bay Locations.

Relative positions of main locations in Dirk Bay.
From: Bing Maps.

'Mark, ahhh ... American Redstart'.

His response was predictable . . . 'Get Stuffed† Coveney!'

Technology has evolved greatly in the last thirty years – language less so! So what to do now? I was terrified of leaving the bird even for a moment, still worried about shouting, and all the time trying to make as many mental notes about it as I could.

All this translated into a minute or two of paralysed silence as the bird worked its way around the garden. It was eventually broken by 'Coveney, you haven't really got an American Redstart??'

Another shout-whisper - 'Mark, you'd better get over here'.

There was a mixture of scrambling noises and detailed threats as to what would happen to me if I was spoofing. As he hopped over the gate, I frantically combined pointing and ‘shhhh’ gestures.

By now Mark realised I wasn’t joking and once he actually saw it, he fell to the ground and rolled around with joy . . . narrowly avoiding the abundant cow droppings. Meanwhile the bird flitted around the garden – apparently oblivious of us. Eventually we calmed down enough to watch the bird in detail and get notes on it even though it was utterly unmistakable.

Perhaps an hour passed as we watched it and intermittently expressed out disbelief at our morning’s birding! Finally, however, hunger reminded us that it was lunchtime and we broke out the sambos on the ditch – while keeping an eye on the bird.

Dennis’s Saucer’s Eyes and Anthony’s Black Socks

It was about 2pm when the nosebags were emptied and we began to wonder what had happened to the Cape crew. If they had chartered the ferry at 8am and gone to Firkeel, they should be here by now! Perhaps they had found something else . . . we had had a first for the Western Palearctic and perhaps the most

desired second Irish on the books and we were worried we were missing something!

Should we wait for them or leave the birds and try to get the news out? The phone box in Ardfield, five minutes away, was usually out of order and getting to and from Clonakilty would take three quarters of an hour! As we considered what to do, we heard the distant sound an engine revving and gravel crunching – a birder’s car for sure!

‘Right Mark, let play this cool if we can’.

Then Dennis O’Sullivan’s car came round the bend and skidded down the hill to a halt next to me.

‘Did ye get the Tanager?’ I said.

‘Yeah, yeah’, said he.

‘What took ye so long – did ye have something else?’ I asked.

‘No, no, the ferry was a bit late and the roads were dead slow and twisty all the way! But what’s happening here? Is the Vireo still here? Is it a Philadelphia?’

‘Yeah and yeah’!!

Fig 7. American Redstart.

Dirk Bay, Galley Head, Co. Cork. October 1985.

Photo: Richard T. Mills.





‘So what are ye doing here – we heard it was in a tree at the bottom of the hill’.

‘It is, . . . but there’s an American Redstart in this garden’.

I can still remember Dennis’ saucer eyes - ‘What??? You so and so+!!!!. I can’t swear these were his exact words but this gives the gist of them! Cue chaotic egress from the car by four panicky birders!

No sooner had they gotten into the garden and got onto the Redstart, when we heard more gravel crunching and two or three more cars pulled up - a megatwitch for Ireland in the 1980s! Included were Jim Dowdall, Tony Marr, and Anthony McGeehan.

By now the excitement overflowed and I just shouted ‘American Redstart in the garden’. Tony Marr nearly managed to get out of his Volkswagen Sirroco while still driving it and I can still see Anthony hurdling the gate in his black socks.

Fig 8. American Redstart.

Dirk Bay, Galley Head, Co. Cork. October 1985.

Photo: Richard T. Mills.

Given that I am now into photography in a big way, my only regret is that I didn’t have a camera that day to record the dozen or so thrilled birders on the best ever Irish twitch!

Anti-climactic End to the Weekend

Eventually everyone had their fill of the Redstart and were far nicer to me than before . . . or since!

As the new arrivals went for the Vireo, I headed out towards the lighthouse – I wasn’t really aware of the gardens on the so-called ‘Shite Lane’ back then but there were a lot of bushes around the last house before the lighthouse.

I was working that garden as the light faded when I had a brief glimpse of a bird with some prominent yellow underneath. For a while, all I could see was a shape moving through the



leaves but no details. My heart was racing again – could we get a fourth yank for the weekend? Eventually, it started to show . . . glossy black head, white cheeks and bright yellow breast split by a black band . . . a bloomin[†] Great Tit!

And that was it – as is often the case with American passerines, the area was otherwise very quiet.

I've seen and found a few good birds since then but nothing to compare with that magical weekend of 30 years ago. I do a lot less birding nowadays . . . but I still dream that I might have one more day in the southwest when Yankee flits are almost common!

And Finally

*As for the 'then girlfriend' . . . Marian I think her name was . . . oops . . . oh yeah we've been married quite a while now! I suppose two fine sons make up for her lack of further additions to my Irish list!

† It's just possible that the expressions used in this article are not an exact reflection of those uttered on the day – naturally the mists of time have drawn a veil over my memory of any vulgarities that may have occurred!

Fig 9. Scarlet Tanager.

Not the 1985 individual, but a 1st winter male that was at Garinish, also on the Beara Peninsula, Co. Cork in 2008.

Photo: Tom Shevlin.

Further Reading

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Grateful Thanks

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John Coveney, February 2015
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