

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Warblers

Was that a Warbler?

Excerpted from Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding by Jack Connor.

Warblers are easy to find; it's identifying them that's so tough. Hawks, shorebirds, and other challenging groups of birds often allow leisurely observation. You can set up your scope, open the field guide, compare a bird with its associates, and call over an expert for help. Warblers do not stand still for telescopes, field guides, or expert assistance. One glimpse and they're gone: "See us now or see us never."

If you can identify one or two species in a flock of sparrows, you've generally identified them all. Warblers usually travel in small bands of several species. While you struggle to identify one or two in a feeding party, four or five other flicker against the light, skip behind the leaves, and slip off into the shadows.

One common sequence of events in warbler watching might be called the warbler four-count. One, a warbler lands on a branch; two, it snatches up an insect; three, it glances around; four, it flies. Stop, snatch, look, go. Stop, snatch, look, go. From the birder's point of view, the sequence usually translates into "Hey! What? Uh? Damn!"

All warblers except the yellow-rump need insect prey to survive. The majority winter in the Caribbean or in Central America. Since they wait until insects are plentiful in our area, they are generally among the last migrants to arrive. When they come, they come at night, often accompanied by other late passerines in huge waves of birds.

Warblers are surprisingly strong fliers. They usually avoid storms by flying over them (up to altitudes of more than three miles, radar tracking has found). When they

weather is good, they frequently cover more than a hundred miles in a single night's flight. A banded yellow-rumped warbler once flew 450 miles in two days.

Where to look?

Good warbler spots tend to have most of the following elements: 1) low deciduous trees, 2) thick, tangled undergrowth, 3) an open or semi-open canopy, 4) clear edges, 5) fresh water, 6) wind protection and 7) pathways that are wide (four feet across or wider) and/or elevated. The first six elements attract the warblers. The last makes it easier to look at them.

Quiet roads around lakes or along rivers are usually excellent warbler spots. The birds frequently feed in the tree limbs closest to the road or reveal themselves by flying across the road and landing in the first tree they reach on the other side. These roads are generally elevated, at least one side, and the extra height offers an advantage to the birder, since the top of a 10- or 12-foot tree may be at eye level.

Ironically, city parks, college campuses, and similar "less natural" habitats are often much better for warbler watching than deep and pretty low-land forests. In artificially landscaped areas, warblers will take refuge in widely separated lines of trees. Unless they are severely disturbed, they tend to move along these lines and so are more easily tacked.

Stratigraphic Specialist

Most warblers prefer certain heights. In many cases the preference is so strong that the stratigraphic level occupied by the warbler can be a clue to its identity.



Other stratigraphic preferences are more subtle and harder to chart, but may still prove helpful once you become aware of them. In the East, for example, you should look twice at any "female hooded warbler" Fly-catching over your head: there's a good chance that the bird is a female Wilson's. Hooded warblers will sometimes be seen up in the mid-levels (especially singing males), but they are more often seen near waist level and below.

You may also find that the stratigraphic preference for particular migrant warblers in your area may differ from those described in the books (including this one).

Spring, as every birder knows, is the best season for warbler watching. The birds are in their finest plumage, and many sing strongly when they are still hundreds of miles south of their nesting grounds. What is not so well known is how brief the spring migration period actually is and how easy it is to miss.

Some warblers move north relatively early – the yellow-rumped, pine, palm, Louisiana waterthrush, black and white, yellow-throated, yellow, prairie, palm, and black-throated green. Three species tend to come late: the blackpoll, morning, and Connecticut. The rest tend to come together and pass through any given area within a period of three weeks or less. Typical peak periods appear in table 3, and dedicated warbler chasers try to be out in the field at every

Stratigraphic Preferences of Warblers

High Level: Blackburnian, blackpoll, black-throated green, cerulean, chestnut-sided, Tennessee, Yellow-throated.

Mid-level: Bay-beasted, black-throated blue, blue-winged, Canada, magnolia, prothonotary

Low level: Common yellowthroat, Connecticut, Kentucky, mourning, ovenbird, palm, Swainson's, waterthrushes (both), and worm-eating.



Warblers for Beginning Birders

Black & White Warbler

Walks along trunks and tree limbs; the nuthatch warbler.



Northern Parula

Tiny and hyperactive; "flickety" wings; the kinglet warbler.



Yellow Warbler

Frequently found in more open areas than other warblers – e.g. solitary willows and farmside hedgerows; the canary warbler.



Ovenbird

Prefers dense undergrowth to open edges and limbs to branches; walks, hops, and teeters; unmistakable song; the thrush warbler.



Common Yellowthroat

Male is the raccoon-faced warbler; both sexes very curious; if you can't pish a yellowthroat, you can't pish.



American Redstart

Fantails and flycatches at all levels; bright and beautiful, the butterfly warbler; in Latin America called candelita – the little torch.



Yellow-rumped Warbler

Widespread and abundant, especially in colder weather; the ubiquitous warbler.

opportunity during the peak period, since weather patterns will determine the fallouts, and these are almost impossible to predict.

No general guide can list the warblers in the sequence in which they will arrive in your area. Different species of warblers migrate at different speeds, so where you live will determine when each reaches you. The Northern Parula, for example, is one as early as the first week in March. It moves northward slowly, however, and does not arrive in Maine until mid-May during the main influx of warblers there.

Especially in spring, the morning after a night of hard rain is the best time to look for a fall-out of passerine migrants. Birding during days intermittent rain can also be productive. The birds will continue to feed during light rains. If the showers stop and the sun breaks through, you can find yourself suddenly surrounded by parties of celebrating, hyperactive warblers.

Wind is a more serious problem. Warblers are more sensitive to wind than most birds and tend to stop moving and hide inside the foliage even during moderate gusts. If the wind starts to blow steadily at more than fifteen miles per hour or so, you should search deeper (and lower) in the woods or, better yet, put on your hawk-watching hat and save the warblers for another day.

The simple and ultimately delightful truth about warblers is that you can never identify all you see. No one can. This is ultimately delightful because it means warblers are always a challenge – warblers will always be a challenge – no matter how skilled you become. You can only become faster and more accurate in identifying them; you can never overmaster them.