

American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*



Folk Name: Butterfly Bird, Candelita (Spanish)

Status: Migrant and local Breeder

Abundance: Common in migration

Habitat: Bottomland hardwoods, wide creek floodplains, moist deciduous forest slopes

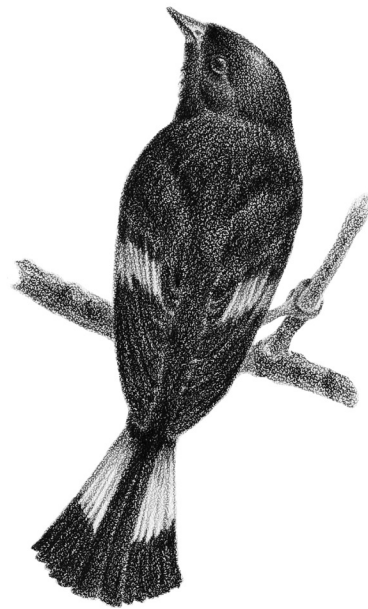
The American Redstart is a spectacular black-and-red-colored bird that is one of our most common migrants and one of the easiest of our warblers to identify. It migrates through this region in good numbers each spring and fall and some stop to breed at scattered locations across both states. *The Charlotte News* published this description, written by an avid North Carolina birder, on October 11, 1910:

Another “find” in which the bird lover takes much pleasure is in the locating of that marvelously colored member of the great Wood Warbler family, the American Redstart. ...The great passing flocks of migratory warblers drop the Redstart off each spring on their Northern journey, and pick him up each fall. A full mature male Redstart, which by the way, acquires his plumage only after two years growth, is truly an exquisite specimen of nature’s handiwork. Imagine a wee small bird, smaller than a canary, of shining black on breast, throat and back, while on it wings and tail and sides are patches of bright salmon color. These strangely colored birds are called in Cuba “Candelita,” the little torch that flames in the gloomy depths of tropical forests.

On September 22, 1936, the editors of the *Statesville Daily Record* remarked that seeing an American Redstart was a “Rare Privilege” and wrote:

Within the week, we have noticed one bird which belongs to the warbler family and we think is unsurpassed in beauty by any other of the tribe. It is the American Redstart. The female of this species is exceptionally pretty too, which is rare in any species of the warblers, as she has the same markings almost as the male except the colors are different being red on the male and yellow on the female. The good that these little birds do when they pass through this section and stop to eat the [insects] parasites from our trees and shrubbery is incalculable.

Birders often call the black-and-yellow females and the similarly-colored first year males “yellowstarts.” Redstarts and yellowstarts are known for their habit of “fanning,” spreading and closing their tails as they forage for insects



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in shrubs or the branches of trees. It’s easy to observe this behavior while out birding during migration.

Leverett Loomis reported the redstart as “abundant” during the late 1870s, and one year he collected three males on 17 August. William McIlwaine provided the first records of the American Redstart in Mecklenburg County. He found one moving through Latta Park on May 8, 1928. He reported many in spring migration in Charlotte from 22 April to 26 April in 1929, and he noted they were seen “often” during fall migration and as late as 7 October that year. He reported redstarts present 19 April–6 May in the spring of 1930 and 15 April–8 May in 1931. He noted them as “fairly common” in migration and also a “summer resident”—breeding there from 1929 to 1931. Charles Sellers found redstarts in Charlotte during both spring and fall migration in 1939, 1940, and 1941, and noted them as a rather “common” breeding bird.

“This morning I had to speak on Birds at Berryhill School. On the way back I came the Steel Creek Road, and stopped a few minutes at the crossing of ‘Sugar Creek’ (called in town Irwin’s Creek). Going down into the wooded bottom I heard and then saw my first redstart of the season. Coming back up on the highway I heard and saw another male, and then saw a female.”

—William McIlwaine, April 15, 1931

In 1944, young John Trott of Stanly County submitted this account as part of his winning essay in the Carolina Bird Club's High School "Ornithology Essay Contest":

I once found a young redstart, just out of the nest. The female was feeding the bird, the male nowhere about. I moved up cautiously, and picked up the young on my finger. The female flew about me and darted very close, pecking at my hand, paying no heed whatsoever to my four companions. The male showed up after about five minutes. He seemed not to fear for the safety of his young, but darted back and forth from one tree to another about fifteen feet away, seeming to call the female away. The nest was finally located about thirty feet up in a maple tree, and we, knowing all the young were out, climbed up to get it. The male attacked the boy who had climbed up the tree fiercely. By this time there had come about three more male redstarts from the surrounding vicinity. The odds seemed to be against us, so we left.

A decade later, Trott reported the American Redstart as a "regular breeder" along the banks of the Yadkin River and as one of the most common warblers there during the summer. He suggested the area was possibly "the southern extreme of their breeding range" and that they prefer "medium sized sapling growth for feeding and nesting." Almost 15 years after that, Mark Simpson reported the redstart was common during the summer along the South Yadkin River into Alexander County, up to about 1,000 feet in elevation.

The nest of the American Redstart can be very difficult to find. Claude A. Murphy of Charlotte, published the following account of an American Redstart nest he found on a visit to his brother's house in Fayetteville on June 6, 1960:

I found a nest of Redstarts on the lower limb of an elm tree. The nest was in the crotch at the extreme end of the limb, and the parents were feeding the young continuously. Around six-thirty, the young left the nest and perched side by side on the limb, all chattering. They were beautiful little things. All underneath was greenish yellow, while their backs were brown. The next day, they were up in the tree, chattering. All was silent after that, so they had probably moved on. ... I cut down the nest and gave it to Mrs. Potter. It was about two inches across the top and about four inches deep, made mostly of grass.

Mrs. Beatrice Potter was a President of Mecklenburg Audubon.

The American Redstart has a protracted migration. This species has been reported arriving in the region as early as 22 March, and late spring migrants can persist until the end of May or into early June. They have been reported on almost every Spring Bird County conducted in the region. Southbound migrants begin to return as early as mid-July, and fall migrants have lingered as late as 22 October.

We have one report of two yellowstarts found lingering at Fisher Farm in Mecklenburg County on 2 November in 2011. Both were observed fanning their tails as they searched for insects. We also have two reports of birds from the months of December through February. One yellowstart was seen on the Gaston County CBC on December 16, 2017. A redstart was reported in Iredell County on February 27, 2008. Our peak count is a one-day tally of 44 birds counted on a spring count in 1979.

Since the 1960s, the American Redstart appears to have declined as a breeder throughout much of this region. The reasons for this are unknown. This species is still believed to breed at several sites like the South Mountains and Pee



A "yellowstart" fanning its tail. (Jim Guyton)



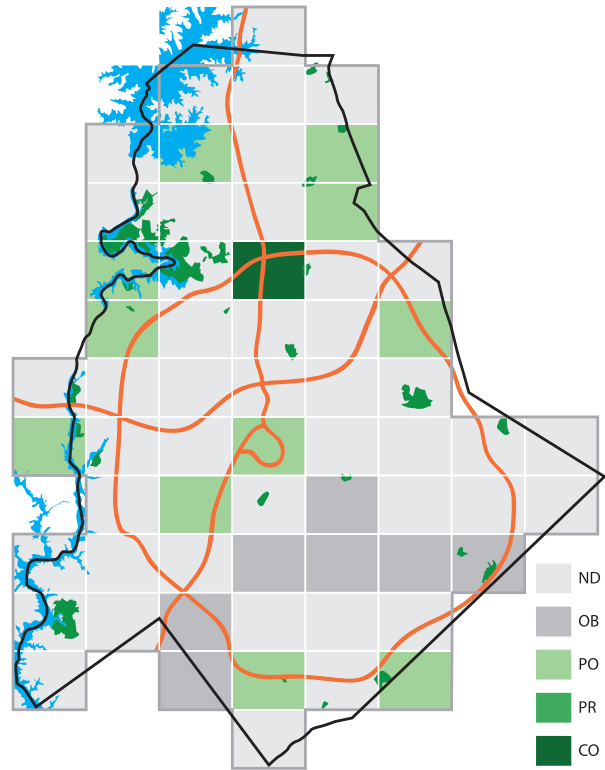
American Redstart in breeding plumage. (Jim Guyton)

Dee NWR, but reports from the nesting season are few from elsewhere in this part of the Carolina Piedmont.

In South Carolina breeding pairs are “scarce to non-existent” outside of the state’s large river bottomland forests. During the state’s BBA survey, redstarts were confirmed breeding near this region in one block each in Kershaw and Chesterfield counties and were designated as probable in a single block in Lancaster County. Breeding was confirmed in Laurens County in 1992, and two territorial pairs were documented near Sharon in York County on May 30, 1999.

In 1965, Elizabeth Clarkson downgraded the designation of the American Redstart in Mecklenburg County from “summer resident” to “rare summer resident,” and 20 years later, changed it to “formerly rare summer resident.” Today, the American Redstart is almost unknown as a breeding bird in Mecklenburg County. Reports during breeding season are scarce. Out of approximately 500 sight records, fewer than a dozen were recorded in Mecklenburg County during the month of June. A few have been reported in early July.

In 2011, Lenny Lampel and Rob Gilson, volunteers for the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas, watched a pair of American Redstarts carrying nesting material into a thicket along the banks of Long Creek, a relatively wide floodplain area west of Huntersville. They were unable to see the actual nest. This sighting provides the only known evidence of the American Redstart breeding in Mecklenburg County, since the early 1950s.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)