

Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*



Folk Name: Brier Bird, Maryland Yellow-throat, Yellowthroat

Status: Breeder and Winter Visitor

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Brushy thickets, abandoned fields, woodland edges (usually moist), wetland edges

The Common Yellowthroat is indeed one of our most common warbler species. This chunky, bright, yellow-throated, and black-masked “bandit” is often seen in fields, thickets, on the edges of wetlands, and in other brushy places throughout the region. In the summer, its song is as well-known as the bird itself—at times, an almost endless *witchety-witchety-witchety-witch* ringing out over the fields. Several local newspapers carried this poem about the “Maryland Yellowthroat” by Amos R. Wells in 1915:

Black masked face uncannily hidden,
Breast a-glimmer with golden bloom,
Where is the mystic steed you have ridden,
Where is your sly little witches’ broom?
Withchery, witchery all around you,
Summer magic in blossom and tree,
Summer spells in the rhythms that bound you,
Shrill of the cricket and boom of the bee.
Witchery most-of-all in your singing,
Poet or vagabond, no one knows which,
Over the meadows your canticle ringing:
Witchery, witchery, witchery witch!

The Common Yellowthroat has been recorded in the Central Carolina region during all months of the year. It is most commonly reported from April through October. Reports of this bird from November through February have become annual over the past three decades, but it is still rare during that season. It has been reported on various Christmas Bird Counts conducted in the region since 1950, with a high count of four birds on one count. It ranks as one of the top 30 birds reported (per party-hour) on local Spring Bird Counts with a peak one-day tally of 81 birds counted in 1983.

R.B. McLaughlin recorded one arriving in Statesville on March 29, 1888. Elmer Brown had a Common Yellowthroat in Salisbury on March 31, 1922. On June 24, 1926, William McIlwaine was examining the nest of a Yellow-breasted Chat and remarked: “Always more or less near is his companion the Maryland Yellow Throat. But the nest of the latter is quite a different thing. I have found two this year. And in neither has there been a second set of eggs.”



Two years later, he wrote:

I am out with Georgie Spratt and Neida DePass, two good pals. Neida finds a thrush nest with three eggs. She is tremendously thrilled. Georgie finds nothing. We go on up making for my buzzards’ nest further up the creek in the bottom that is high-grown with weeds. My girls do finely, hunting assiduously. Suddenly, from over in the weeds



Adult male at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge. Female with food. (Kevin Metcalf, Jeff Lemons)

comes a tremendous squeal. There is Georgie jumping up and down, and pointing to something down in the weeds and grass. Immediately I knew what to expect. And sure enough, there it was—the nest of a Maryland yellow-throat with its four white eggs spotted with dark brown on the larger end. The bird was sitting.

In 1940, Charlie Sellers noted an arrival date of 7 April and a departure date of 6 October. He designated the Yellowthroat as an “abundant” breeding bird. In 1941, he recorded their arrival on 5 April and noted them as a rare but regular bird in Charlotte during the winter. Elizabeth Clarkson noted that her first “Maryland” Yellowthroat arrived on 4 April in 1944 at “about the same time that they usually come back, the occasional early ones pass on perhaps.” She reported nest building beginning around 25 April.

John Trott provided a detailed description of the nest of a Common Yellowthroat in Stanly County in 1944. The nest was discovered in a marsh beside a field:

I knew the nest was there for the male bird was chirping and hopping about with a worm in his mouth. He seemed much braver than the female, who sat quietly in a tree chirping now and then. He kept going down in a certain clump of grass. Of course we knew that the nest was there and proceeded to look for it. It wasn't there! He, finding out that we were falling for his trick, proceeded to lead us to another clump, the female joining him this time. The male finally got tired of holding the worm and trying to chirp excitedly at the same time, ate it. He then went to look for another. By the time he had returned we had found the nest in a clump of grass, nearly ten feet from the place the male had tried to lure us to. There were two eggs, a small young and a larger young. This latter I believed to be a young cowbird. I took some pictures, and upon returning three days later I found the nest completely empty, the work of some stray cat or blacksnake. The adult birds were nowhere to be seen.

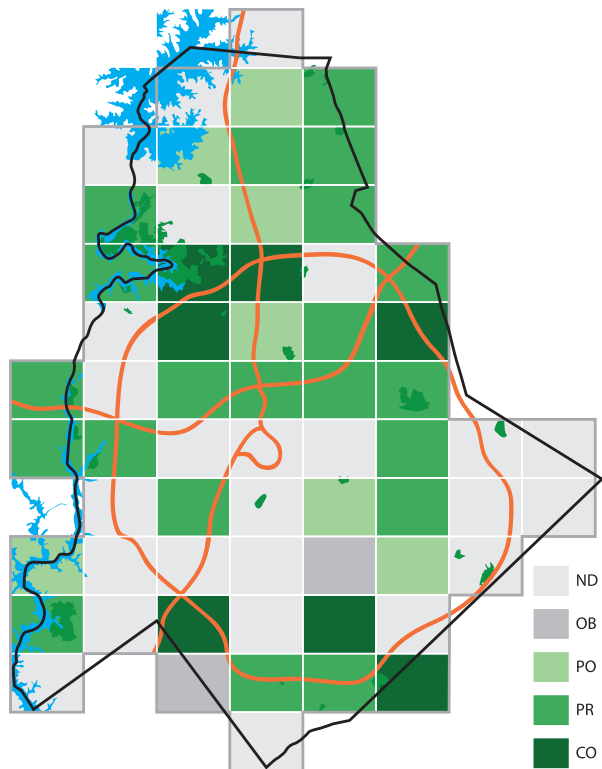


Common Yellowthroat nestlings. (MCPRD staff)

Trott later found four nests and reported “there may be second broods.”

A tragic account of the Common Yellowthroat was reported from Chesterfield County in 1942. There was a “rain” of hundreds of Common Yellowthroats in Cheraw at 4:30 a.m. on 15 May, with thousands more falling from the sky in Pageland and in Lee County. These birds fell dead from the sky during the peak of migration. The death toll of songbirds over the entire region was estimated to be “enormous, running into the millions.” Harry Hampton of *The State*, a newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, theorized that the birds were “drawn up into a region of frozen and rarefied air, and there chilled till they could no longer fly but dropped dead or dying to the earth below.”

In the early 2000s, MCPRD staff monitored the fate of three Common Yellowthroat nests. None of the three nests successfully fledged any young. Two of the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds with the parents raising the cowbird instead of their own young. The babies in the remaining nest were killed by a black rat snake. A decade later, staff found a Common Yellowthroat nest built in a short shrub about 20 feet directly in front of the observation platform at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge. The nest was so well concealed that observers looking down at it were not able to see the nest or the parent birds once they had flown into it.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Fairly Widespread (PR/21, CO/7)