

## Kentucky Warbler *Geothlypis formosus*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Uncommon

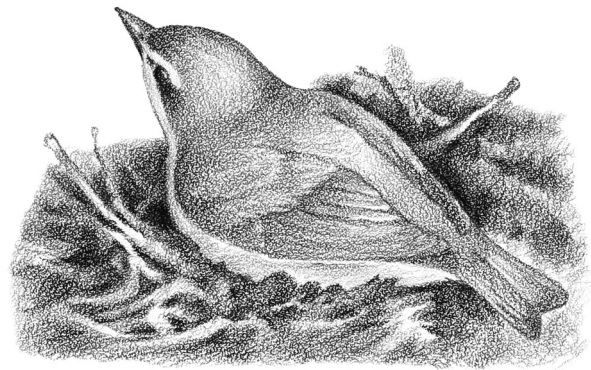
**Habitat:** Deciduous forests (moist)

The Kentucky Warbler inhabits deep, sheltered bottomland hardwood forest habitat. It requires areas with a dense, thickly vegetated understory for successful nesting. This warbler is a bright spot of yellow in the shady gloom of this often sunless forest tangle. It can be found in appropriate habitat throughout both Carolinas below about 3,500 feet elevation.

In August 1919, *The Monroe Journal* in Union County shared this note with their readers:

Some birds are awfully curious and want to know what is going on. So if they see a human being in their neighborhood they will come close to investigate and perhaps to scold, and one of these birds is the Kentucky warbler...This bird has a preference for woods which are low and damp and ordinarily keep well within the depths of tangled thickets.

Unfortunately, as land is subjected to pressure from development, this type of breeding habitat is quickly lost, and the Kentucky Warbler is lost along with it. In addition to habitat loss on its breeding grounds, this warbler's forested wintering grounds, in Central America, are being impacted by logging as well. The Kentucky Warbler has now been listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is considered to be a



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species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action.

Biologists with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission are conducting a special study to survey and monitor Kentucky Warblers and other declining songbirds that nest in forested riparian corridors in the state. Detailed information is needed on the causes—other than continued loss of habitat—that are contributing to the steep population decline of these species.

Kentucky Warblers have alternately been described as both “shy” and “curious” birds. They are olive-green above and bright yellow below with a black cap and black “sideburn” or “whisker” marks. They search for insects on the ground or in shrubs. They sing a loud *churry-churry-churry* breeding song, but are often hard to get a good look at while they move about in their tangled habitat. Their nests can be quite challenging to find.



*Singing Kentucky Warbler at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve. (Phil Fowler)*



*Kentucky Warbler nest at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve in 2002. (MCPRD staff)*

On May 12, 1929, Davidson College student Frank Brown and Elmer, his older brother, discovered one of the first nests of Kentucky Warbler ever recorded in North Carolina. The nest was situated in a thickly overgrown creek bottom near Greensboro. Elmer Brown provided this description: "It was on the ground among weeds in fairly open damp woods, and was composed of leaves and lined with grass and a few rootlets. There were young birds about a week old."

On May 6, 1930, William McIlwaine discovered a pair of Kentucky Warblers in Charlotte, in deep woods along Sugaw Creek. He went back several times to find the nest, but was ultimately unsuccessful, writing: "And he sang and sang and sang. I think he felt quite safe about his house."

A year later McIlwaine wrote:

I was coming down the little stream after working with the water thrush when there arose such an amazing riot just ahead of me, and three yellow streaks shot across and into a little clump of various growths. More bird screaming, and then one came out and went down to the branch. Creeping up I thought I had a Maryland yellow-throat. But no, it was too sharp a call. And it did no scolding. Presently I caught sight of a female Kentucky walking (hopping) through the weeds, etc. calling her alarm as she went. And she was being answered by a voice a little higher and clearer just a little way beyond. After a bit I made him out, the male. A nest will be here, if it has not already been made. The Kentucky chooses low, damp weedy places.

In the summer of 1946, members of the Mecklenburg Audubon Club provided two nest records for this species from Charlotte:

Two nests were found. The first on June 5th, had four young. On the 8th these had left the nest. On the 8th, a second nest with one egg and two young was located. Both nests were on the ground and were surprisingly large. Site: a rather heavy patch of woods along Briar Creek near the crossing at Commonwealth Avenue. The old birds stayed in the vicinity and kept up a continuous chirping that sounded very much like the note of a Cardinal.

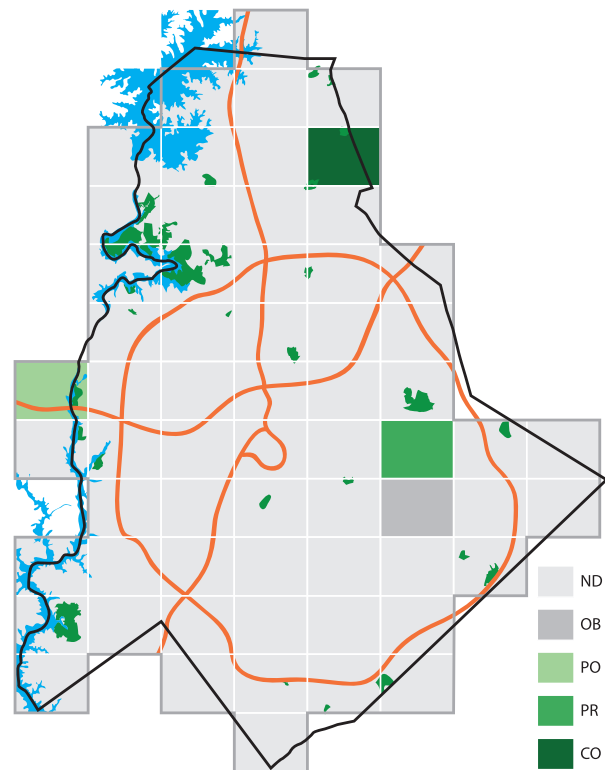
In the 1950s, John Trott reported the Kentucky Warbler was a common breeding bird in appropriate habitat throughout the Yadkin River valley. Trott noted it preferred "large deciduous woods where the undergrowth is regular but not too thick." He found three nests.

Our earliest spring arrival date of a Kentucky Warbler in the Central Carolinas is 8 April. David McCloy heard and saw one at Pee Dee NWR in Anson County in 2015. The latest fall date of a Kentucky Warbler sighted in this region is a bird Martina Nordstrand photographed in Union County on October 10, 2014. We have no reports

during the months of November through March. Our peak one-day count is 13 birds tallied on a Spring Bird Count in 1965.

A male Kentucky Warbler was collected from the base of the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte airport after colliding with it on the night of September 25, 1955. H. Lee Jones found a female Kentucky Warbler near Lake Wylie on May 27, 1971. A specimen of a Kentucky Warbler was collected during fall migration on September 27, 2010 in York County. Liam Seriff collected a dead Kentucky Warbler during spring migration on April 29, 2012, as part of Mecklenburg Audubon's Lights Out survey of nocturnal migrants hitting lighted buildings in downtown Charlotte.

Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in five or fewer survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as an imperiled breeding bird that is especially vulnerable to extirpation. Repeated searches were made of former breeding sites with little success. Rob Van Epps discovered two pair of Kentucky Warblers on territory during breeding season in 2015. The birds were found in riparian forest habitat that has been protected in a partnership between the landowner and the Catawba Lands Conservancy. This site is currently the last known nesting site of the Kentucky Warbler in Mecklenburg County.



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
*Very Local (PR/1, CO/1)*