

Louisiana Waterthrush *Parkesia motacilla*



Folk Name: Branch Thrush, Aquatic Accentor, Large-billed Water-Thrush, Water Wagtail

Status: Migrant and Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

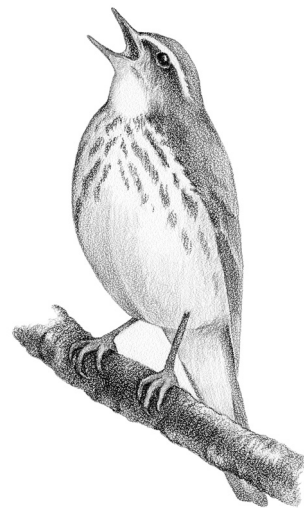
Habitat: Forests with rocky streams, riparian zones

The Louisiana Waterthrush is tied with the Ovenbird as our second largest warbler. Only the Yellow-breasted Chat is larger. This waterthrush averages 6 inches in length, which is about the size of the common House Sparrow. It is brown above and is heavily streaked below. It has a salmon or “rose-pink” color on its flanks. It has a white eyebrow that widens as it moves from the bill, past the eye, to the back of the head. It is almost always seen walking on the ground beside a fast-flowing stream. These birds bob as they walk, and their pink legs often stand out.

The song of the Louisiana Waterthrush has been described as “wild,” “strong,” “loud,” “clear,” “ringing,” “thrilling,” “sharp,” “resonant,” “musical,” and more. This bird has to be loud so it can be heard above the noise of a gurgling brook or a rushing foothills stream. It has a distinctive sharp, metallic *chink* call that is easy to learn to recognize.

“For the first time this season I saw a Louisiana Waterthrush...in secluded country, in a wood, and down by a tumbling stream. He was singing loudly. ...And oh, what a ringing voice he has, and how he dips his tail, stopping a moment in his wading in the mud and water.”
—William McIlwaine, April 16, 1931, and May 12, 1931

This warbler breeds throughout the Carolina Piedmont, although it is more common in rocky streams in our western counties. Usually only one pair nests in



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a single creek channel. It generally arrives in this region in March and departs by the second week of September. Our earliest arrival date for spring is 10 March, and our latest departure date in the fall is 23 September. We have two reports from the region in the month of October that provided no details and therefore are not included. Our peak one-day count is eight birds tallied on a spring count in 1966.

We have a single record from the months of November through February. On February 24, 2017, Kevin Metcalf photographed an early Louisiana Waterthrush in Mecklenburg County. He wrote:

Had my first (and first ever in February) Louisiana Waterthrush of the spring at McDowell Nature Preserve, near the parking lot for the Four Seasons



Louisiana Waterthrush. (Jeff Lemons)



Nest at Latta Plantation NP. (Christine Lawson)

Trail. Incredibly early. Actually first heard the bird's wings as it flew in and landed on a branch close to me. I looked up and saw a bird silhouetted, bobbing its tail, then it gave its loud chip note. Watched it sitting and preening for a while but it didn't sing at least while I was there.

In 1887, R.B. McLaughlin published one of the earliest accounts of the nesting of the Louisiana Waterthrush. He found them regularly breeding in Statesville, arriving "between the 25th and 30th of March," and nesting "about the 10th of April." He noted that they built their nests in a spot concealed by an overhanging bank in smaller clear, rocky stream channels as opposed to larger stream channels. He felt this was done to better protect the nest from possible inundation. He also noted the adults regularly left the nest site to feed in the larger channels downstream.

McLaughlin provided details of the nest:

It is usually placed from a foot to two and a half feet above the water. The bottom part consists wholly of dead leaves pasted together with mud. ...Inside of this are finer, dryer leaves, followed by rootlets, grasses and at times some hair, which constitutes the lining. I meet with no other nest so cleverly assimilated to its surroundings. ...All of the nests I have seen are over running water except one. ...The nest complement is four or five, mostly five.

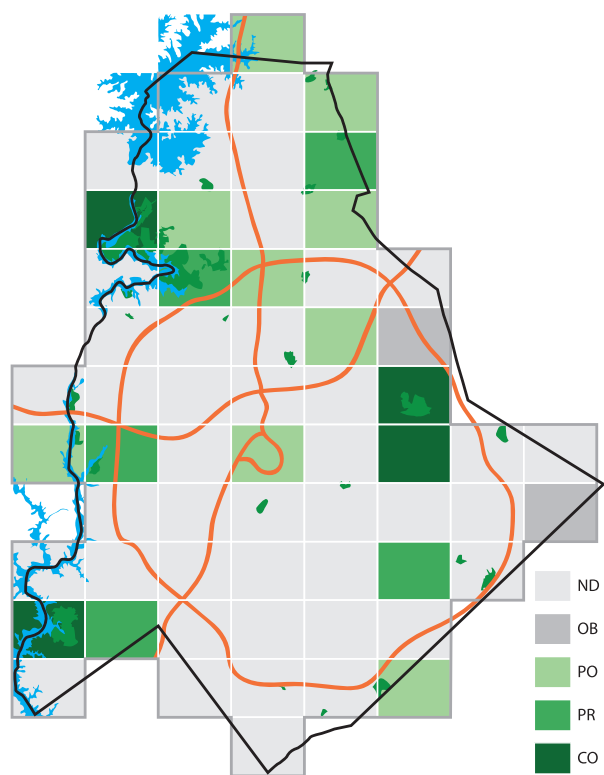
One clutch of five Waterthrush eggs McLaughlin collected in Iredell County on April 29, 1891, is preserved in the egg collection at the Smithsonian.

John Trott, a Charlotte-area educator, photographer, and naturalist, watched a Louisiana Waterthrush on June 30, 1943, in the town of New London and observed an unusual behavior. The bird would repeatedly "catch an insect, dip it into the water and then eat it...as if he was washing it." He described this warbler as "a regular breeder where large creeks in deep deciduous woods occur" in Stanly County and documented a nest with young on May 6, 1954, and a nest with eggs on May 28, 1955.

Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed

or probable in 6 to 10 survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as a "vulnerable" breeding bird. Clear, fast-flowing, rocky stream channels have been largely eliminated in the county.

Matthew Harrell found a Louisiana Waterthrush nest at McDowell Nature Preserve on April 22, 2014. The nest was in a small rocky streambed with steep sides in a fairly open hardwood forest. It was situated under a small overhang about 3 feet above the water. There appeared to be four eggs in the nest. Christina Lawson photographed a nest with four eggs at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve on May 27, 2017, in the same type of habitat as the McDowell nest. All four nestlings fledged by 8 June. Lawson noted that on both visits, the "angry mama bird" stayed close by, loudly scolding, as the nest was photographed.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/5, CO/4)