

Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorum*



Folk Name: Hillside Warbler

Status: Migrant and local Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Hillsides and ravines in mature deciduous or mixed forest (often dry) with evergreen shrubs

Four dark stripes running across a buffy head from the bill to the nape, distinguish this bird from all other warblers. Two stripes run across the crown and one runs through each eye. This warbler is olive green and brown above, and buffy, orange, and white below. Its song sounds like a faster, higher-pitched Chipping Sparrow trill.

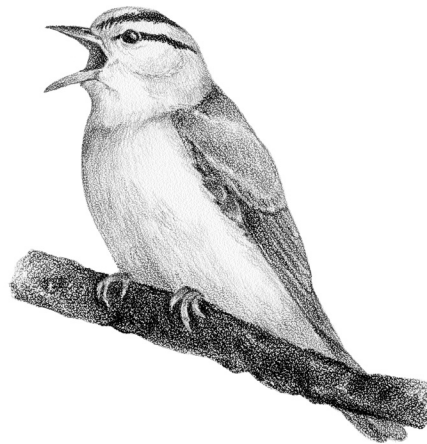
The Worm-eating Warbler is primarily a migrant through most of the Central Carolinas. However, we have reports of this bird present in this region from the end of March through the first week of October. In the spring, most move through in April and May. Our earliest report is a bird sighted on 21 March in 2004. It was seen at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve in Charlotte by Steve Mumford and a British “twitcher” named Ken who was visiting the area at the time. They were both quite excited to find it and exclaimed they had gotten “an early case of warbler neck, and boy it feels good!”

The Worm-eating Warbler has only been reported on about a quarter of spring bird counts conducted in this region. One was a highlight for the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on May 6, 1954. John Trott reported: “This species is a rare migrant and I have only three records: One in September, 1948, and on June 5, 6, 1954.” The latter dates being notably quite late if these birds were indeed migrants.

Fall birds are most often reported from early July through early September. The latest report was 4 October in both 2012 and 2014. In October 2014, Steve Tracy sighted one with a mixed flock of warblers moving through the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden in Belmont.

The first report of a Worm-eating Warbler ever found in winter in North Carolina was published in 1963 by Elizabeth Clarkson in Charlotte. Since her report, there have only been two or three reports of Worm-eating Warbler in December in North Carolina. Clarkson’s excitement at finding such an unusual bird out of season is readily apparent in her writing:

This afternoon, 16 December 1963, as I opened my bedroom window on the second floor overlooking the drive, to throw a mealworm down to a female Cardinal, I saw a little olive-brown bird in the ivy at the base of the large Cedar standing close by. There were heavy head stripes, but I realized at once that it was not “just another White-throat.” I got my field



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glasses and watched it through the open window as it went in and out of the ivy on the ground below me. Then I ran down stairs and out on the drive and watched it closely for some time. It continued to work through the ivy, occasionally moving to an open stem where I could readily see by its unmarked breast and dark stripe through each eye and each side crown that it was a Worm-eating Warbler.

Clarkson had accumulated over 30 years of experience birding at the time of this sighting and the account was accepted for publication, but a photograph would have helped greatly to confirm this first-ever, and still unique, winter record.



Worm-eating Warbler. (Jeff Lemons)

Breeding Bird Survey distribution data indicate the Worm-eating Warbler is largely absent from most of the Carolina Piedmont during breeding season. However, it appears to be a rare or sporadic breeding bird in the Central Carolinas. The Worm-eating Warbler is believed to breed in small numbers in the Foothills on the extreme western edge of our region. Birds have been reported during June in the South Mountains and in Alexander County. An adult was observed with a fledgling in South Mountain State Park on June 11, 2014. It is interesting to note that Mark Simpson did not find this warbler during his study of summer birds in these areas in the late 1960s.

A small breeding population persists in the Uwharrie Mountains. Several observers found Worm-eating Warblers on territory in the Uwharrie National Forest during the summer of 1983. They were reported breeding there through 1999, and there are multiple eBird reports of this bird there in June during the past decade.

Paul Hart reported Worm-eating Warblers on territory at Crowders Mountain State Park in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s. He had three males on territory in May and June 1983. Hart reported finding a pair “along the Backside Trail that were highly agitated at my presence, most likely indicating the presence of a nest or fledglings nearby. I never found a nest though.” This bird has not been reported at the park during breeding season since the 1980s. An avifaunal baseline analysis conducted at nearby Kings Mountain National Military Park in the early 2000s noted this warbler as only a migrant in these mountains. However, one was sighted in the park on June 24, 2010.

South Carolina ornithologist John Cely noted the Worm-eating Warbler has “an enigmatic” distribution in South Carolina with breeding at the coast and the mountains, but seldom in the Piedmont. State Park biologist Irvin Pitts described it as “at best quite rare in the Piedmont” during breeding season. One nesting site was confirmed in northwestern Chesterfield County and a probable nesting site was reported in Cherokee County during the South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas survey. Cely and Pitts noted that this warbler is a fairly common breeder in the state along the slopes and hillsides of the Blue Ridge escarpment with an understory of rhododendron and mountain laurel.

R.B. McLaughlin reported the arrival of Worm-eating Warbler in Statesville on 13 April in 1887 and on 18 April in 1888. Leverett Loomis reported that the Worm-eating Warbler was known only as a migrant around Chester County in the late 1800s. He collected specimens in fall at intervals from 25 July to 6 October and in the spring from 19 April to 12 May. Stephen C. Bruner recorded the Worm-eating Warbler as a breeding resident in Alexander County in 1909.

Worm-eating Warblers were banded at the MAPS banding station at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on June 22, 2001, and June 24, 2003. Bill Hilton Jr. netted and banded an after-hatch-year female at the Hilton Pond Center on July 9, 2002. The bird had a brood patch which implies local breeding. It is possible all three of these banded birds had recently bred somewhere close by and were already beginning their journey southward for the fall.