

Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia*



Folk Name: Summer Warbler, Summer Yellow-bird

Status: Migrant and local Breeder

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Shrubby thickets, willows, groves, open areas

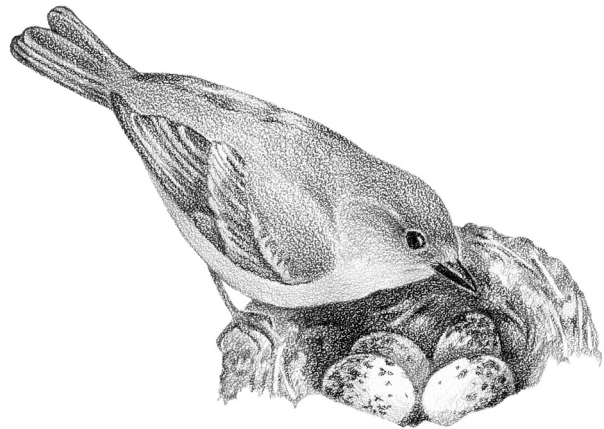
The status of the Yellow Warbler has changed dramatically in this region over the past century. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was a common breeding bird throughout most of the Piedmont and west into the mountains up to about 3,500 feet in elevation. Leverett Loomis reported it present in numbers in “cultivated valleys” in South Carolina. T.G. Pearson reported it breeding in North Carolina from Raleigh westward, and he reported that “the species seems to breed entirely in orchards, shade trees, and upland groves, apparently rarely nesting in what might be called natural forest conditions.” Today, this bird only breeds sporadically in the Carolina Piedmont, and it is much less common as a breeding bird in the mountains than it was historically.

E.M. Hoffman reported a Yellow Warbler in migration in Rowan County on April 14, 1923. At the time, this warbler was often seen around gardens and in other cultivated areas. William McIlwaine was the first person to describe Yellow Warblers nesting in Mecklenburg County: “I associate the nest with the water willows along the bank of Sugaw Creek in Charlotte. Usually the elevation is from a few feet to ten or twelve.” On May 15, 1928, he provided some nest details:

A very interesting sight was the foundation for a yellow warbler’s nest. This too was low on the edge of Sugaw Creek. The material being used was down, seemingly from a water willow. ... On May 14 I found a pair of warblers beginning their nest. They were using the down from a water willow, and building in a little willow, in a fork near the end of a little limb about fifteen feet above Sugaw Creek, and about on a level with the bank. On May 22 this nest held two white eggs with dark spots on the much larger end. When I visited this nest (May 30) it held four eggs.

Each year he returned to this nesting location, and on April 21, 1930, he reported that: “All up and down the creek were yellow warblers, and all of them singing.”

Elizabeth Clarkson reported Yellow Warblers occasionally visiting her backyard during the 1943 nesting season and stated they “evidently have nests nearby.” In the spring of 1945, her husband Edwin reported a Yellow Warbler “making himself heard and seen not 25 feet from the office building” that he worked at in



downtown Charlotte. Ernest Mitchell was “lucky enough to find a nest with three young Yellow Warblers, about six feet above the ground” in a field near his home in Charlotte in June 1948. John Trott reported the Yellow Warbler breeding “in bordering counties” around Stanly in the early 1950s, but he had “never observed it” in Stanly after the first week of May. Jack Hamilton and Rhett Chamberlain spotted “[a] Yellow Warbler, not previously seen this season,” on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 4, 1957.

Today, the Yellow Warbler is a regular migrant through the region each spring and fall, though it is less numerous than it once was. It has seldom been missed on a Spring Bird Count in the region. A peak total one-day count of 24 birds was recorded on the Charlotte SBC in 2012. Our earliest spring arrival date is 18 March. Most birds have moved through by the end of May, but a few are occasionally reported in the months of June and July. Fall



Yellow Warbler. (jim Guyton)

migrants begin arriving in late July or early August, and our last fall departure date is 9 October.

There are three reports of this species in winter in Spartanburg. An adult male was reported on the Spartanburg CBC on January 4, 1997, another Yellow Warbler was seen on the same count on January 2, 1998, and one was reported again on December 30, 2000. The South Carolina Bird Records Committee declined to accept at least one of these reports “due to a lack of fine detail in the written description and a less than rigorous elimination of more likely species.”

A pair of Yellow Warblers was photographed on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count held December 26, 2016, providing the first winter record of this species in Mecklenburg County and the first eBird record for the North Carolina Piedmont. These birds were subsequently relocated several times and lingered until at least January 5, 2017.

The Yellow Warbler was historically a relatively common breeding bird in Mecklenburg County. It continued to be designated a summer resident in the county until the early 1980s, when its status was downgraded to “rare summer resident.” At the same time, biologists had noted that Yellow Warbler had become “rare as breeders” throughout much of the Piedmont.

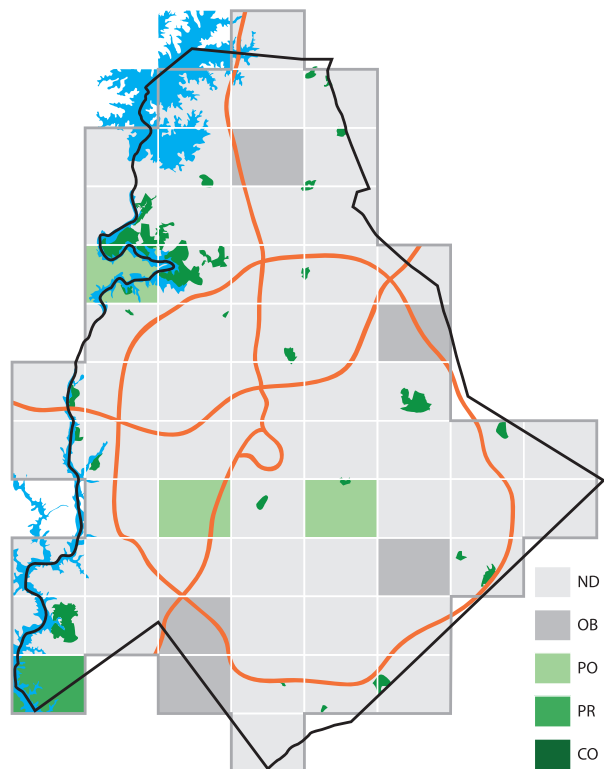
Four tantalizing breeding reports of Yellow Warbler were submitted during the Mecklenburg County BBA. Unfortunately, the highest level of evidence was “probable” in only a single block according to the established BBA protocol.

Volunteers Tom Sanders and Ron Clark reported watching a Yellow Warbler feed a young bird at Clarks Creek Nature Preserve on August 4, 2010. The young bird was capable of flight, so the actual site of fledging could possibly have been outside the county, and the bird could not be officially counted as a local bird. Sanders and Clark found a male in the same spot a year later and suspected a pair of Yellow Warblers were breeding there, but no evidence of breeding was obtained.

The author and Taylor Piephoff located a pair of Yellow

Warblers at the Renaissance Golf Course during the Charlotte Spring Bird Count held on April 28, 2012. One of the warblers was observed carrying what appeared to be nesting material. The birds were in appropriate habitat, but the date was early for nesting, and despite searching on subsequent visits, no other evidence of nesting was obtained.

Finally, biologist Lenny Lampel documented probable breeding of Yellow Warbler on June 29, 2014, in Block 69. He provided a breeding code of “T”: permanent territory presumed through defense.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/1, CO/0)