

(Jim Guyton)



## Parulidae the WOOD WARBLERS

The Wood Warblers (or New World Warblers) are often called the “butterflies of the bird world.” They are small, colorful, active birds that are usually found flitting about leaves in the branches of trees in search of insects. There are 116 species, and they are found only in the Western Hemisphere. Forty-two of these have been documented in North and South Carolina. Most of these birds are medium- to long-distance migrants that move between breeding grounds in North America and wintering grounds in the Neotropics. Male warblers sing a variety of delightful songs during spring migration and after arriving at their breeding territories.

In April 1926, Queens College ornithologist A.L. Pickens (at Furman University at the time) published a lengthy article in several Carolina newspapers describing and illustrating 33 species of “Carolina Piedmont Warblers”:

Travel worn and tired they stop to mate and sing...They are coming back...the Wood-Warblers! They make up a family of the greatest travelers in the world. After careful enquiry I find them to be perhaps the least known family of birds that we encounter. This is hardly to be wondered at, for [of] the thirty-three warblers we may look for in the Piedmont... twenty-nine...are tourists with us only in spring and fall.

Almost 100 years later, we have documented a total of 38 species of warblers in the Carolina Piedmont and have learned that 22 of them are true tourists, just passing through here in spring and fall, while the remaining 16 nest in all or part of the region.

The search for colorful spring warblers is one of the highlights of the year for many people each April and May. Carolina birders fan out across both states and conduct annual Spring Bird Counts that attempt to tally as many species of warblers (and other birds) as possible. After a long day in the field, birders often return home with complaints of “warbler neck,” the name given to the aches and pains in the neck and shoulders due to constantly searching the tops of trees using binoculars. Most consider the rewards well worth the temporary trauma.

Warbler watching in the fall is an entirely different matter. Many of these birds have molted from their breeding (alternate) plumage into their non-breeding (basic) plumage and look very little like the bird that moved through in the spring. Most are quiet as well. Identifying “confusing fall warblers” is a sport unto itself. It takes a great deal of patience, analytical ability, lots of good reference material, and, once again, the willingness to contract a case of “warbler neck.” Fortunately, stretching, using good posture, and wearing a binocular harness can help alleviate this short-term problem.

Warblers are primarily nocturnal migrants—flying at night and resting and foraging for food during the day. Generally, they move before or after major weather fronts. At times, they get backed up behind these fronts with other songbirds and must drop out of the sky by the thousands to rest before moving onward. This grounding phenomenon is known as “songbird” fallout or “warbler” fallout. Fallout events create a great deal of excitement among birders.

There are many excellent places to observe warbler migration in the Central Carolinas. Cowan’s Ford and Pee Dee wildlife refuges, county and state parks, greenways along streams and rivers, among others. Latta Park, located in Charlotte’s Dilworth neighborhood, has been known as a mecca for spring warblers for a century. Birders gather there each year to get a look at the variety of colorful warblers moving through. The warblers have been often described as being so numerous there that they were “dripping” from the trees.

In early spring of 1928, William McIlwaine wrote: “I have often stood in Latta Park and seen them thick in the trees,” and “[o]ur record for warblers so far this season is 16, fourteen of these seen in Charlotte, all but one of the fourteen in Latta Park.”

As a pleasant diversion during the height of World War II, Elizabeth Clarkson challenged other birders in North Carolina to beat her record of the number of warblers found in her yard. She recorded 24 different types at Wing Haven in Charlotte’s Myers Park neighborhood and asked: “Can anybody beat it?”

Perhaps our most prolific warbler “watcher” has been local bird bander Bill Hilton Jr. Since 1982, Hilton has banded an astounding 35 of the 38 species of warblers known in the Central Carolinas; only Kirtland’s, Cerulean, and Mourning

have remained elusive. This was all completed at his banding station at Hilton Pond, his home and research center, in York County.

In most instances, specific details regarding identification are not presented in the following accounts. The identification of warblers can be quite complicated, especially in the fall season. Readers should refer to one of the various field guides or websites with a focus on warblers for pointers on field marks, songs, and for more information about breeding and wintering ranges.