

Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*



Folk Name: Black and White Creeper, Creeping Warbler, White-poll Warbler

Status: Migrant, Breeder, and Winter Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Mature deciduous forests, mixed pine-hardwood forest, stream bottoms in the Piedmont

The Black-and-white Warbler is one of our two warbler species that are quickly recognizable due to their simple black-and-white coloring. The other is the Blackpoll Warbler. This bird is black-and-white streaked with a noticeable white eyebrow and an all-white belly. At 5 ¼ inches, it is a quarter-inch smaller than our common Yellow-rumped Warbler.

For many years, the Black-and-white Warbler was known as the “Black-and-white Creeper” because of its habit of feeding by climbing and creeping up and down along the trunk and limbs of our woodland trees. It is an active bird that methodically searches the bark of trees throughout the day for a variety of invertebrates to eat. Its song is a high-pitched, thin, wiry, drawn-out *tsee, tsee, tsee*, or *weachy-weachy-twe-twe-treet* that has been described as sounding like someone is “boring with a dull rusty auger” or the slow “turning of a squeaky wheel.”

The Black-and-white Warbler is a scattered breeding bird in forests throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is more common in western counties and in areas with more forest cover. It is rare to absent in most heavily developed regions. We have records of this warbler present in the region every month of the year, though it is rare from November through February. Spring migrants generally arrive in the region in March and move through by the end of October. Our peak one-day count is 26 birds.



The brood patch was checked on this female warbler while it was being banded. This patch helps keep the eggs warm while she sits on the nest. (MCPRD staff)



In 1879 in Chester County, Leverett Loomis reported Black-and-white Warblers “in full song from time of their first arrival” in the middle of March and that their behavior was “very shy on first appearance, but soon becomes familiar and unsuspecting.” R.B. McLaughlin reported the earliest arrival of Black-and-white Warbler in Statesville during the late 1800s was 21 March with an average arrival date of 27 March. On April 26, 1887, McLaughlin collected what was later described as “a remarkable set of eggs” of this warbler. The set of five creamy-white eggs “speckled with bright reddish brown and lilac” measured unusually large for this species and the collection was deemed so unusual that an article describing their measurements in detail was published in the national journal *Ornithologist and Oologist*. The nest was located on the ground beside a small bush which is often the setting for this bird. The adult warbler was flushed from the nest when it was first discovered.

Elmer Brown reported this warbler arriving in Salisbury on March 28, 1924. William McIlwaine reported the early arrival of one in Charlotte on March 19, 1927. He wrote: “But, oh joy! A black and white warbler...The Birds of North Carolina...says he arrives about the end of March, but here he is on the 19th. And I am glad to welcome him.” Two months later on 13 May, he watched a Black-and-white Warbler feeding a baby. He noted “The little one was able to fly a little.”

On April 17, 1928, William McIlwaine wrote:

A bird that I saw Friday for the first time this season was the black and white warbler. How clean and trim he looked! And whether with boy or with girl, the most conspicuous dress is severely plain black and white. This was April 13. Last year I had seen the black and white warbler on March 19. The books say he appears in North Carolina from the

South about the last of March. It was interesting to watch this little fellow as he went round and round the trunk of a tree. Then he jumped into the air suddenly, to return with a large moth which he proceeded to tear to pieces and eat. He got the head first, which I thought was wise.

On May 26, 1929, Frank Brown observed a pair of Black-and-white Warblers feeding “almost full feathered young at the Catawba River near Davidson College.” A decade later, Elizabeth Clarkson discovered a Black-and-white Warbler nest in Charlotte on April 20, 1939. This bird had lined its nest with “the finest copper filament out of telephone cable.” She returned to the nest after the young fledged and secured the nesting materials which she later mailed to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum. This nest material can still be examined at the museum today.

Gabriel Cannon reported a Black-and-white Warbler still present in Spartanburg on December 23, 1941. This is our first winter record. In 1943, Black-and-white Warblers arrived in Charlotte by 10 April. In the early 1950s in Stanly County, John Trott reported the Black-and-white Warbler as a “common breeding bird on wooded hillsides where the undergrowth is not too thick,” and he reported he had “seen adults feeding fledglings out of the nest on many occasions during the last week of May and early June.”

Sarah Nooe reported three dead at the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte airport on the night of September 25, 1955. The Norwoods collected 12 Black-and-white Warblers that had died after striking a television tower in east Charlotte on the night of October 1, 1959. Elizabeth Clarkson designated this bird a breeding resident in Charlotte between 1944 and the early 1970s, but changed

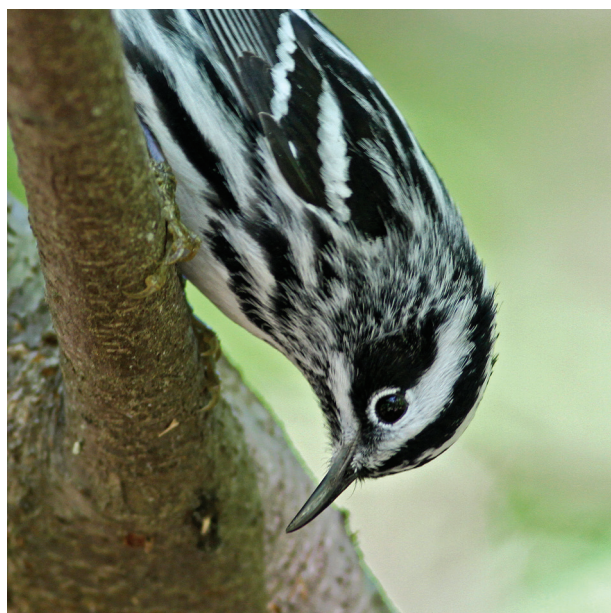
this to “[f]ormerly summer resident...no recent records” in 1986.

Heathy Walker provided a winter report of a bird in Charlotte on January 15, 1991. In June 1991, Lex Glover reported probable breeding birds near the town of Kershaw in Lancaster County and in the towns of Ruby, Pageland, and Patrick in Chesterfield County.

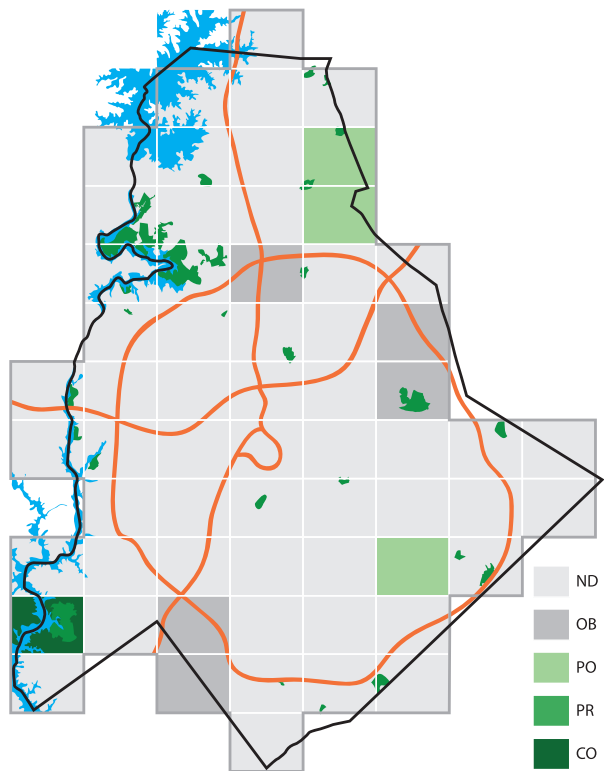
Donna Bailey observed a female feeding two fledglings in Fairfield County on May 12, 2001. Tomm Lorenzin had one in a yard on Lake Norman in Iredell County on June 20, 2003. Stephen Thomas photographed a Black-and-white Warbler he described as “suffering from migration exhaustion,” found lying on the streets of Charlotte on September 10, 2007. The bird may have hit a building, but it appeared alert. Lenny Lampel found one in trees beside the ball fields at Abbott Road Park in Charlotte on February 20, 2013. Tom Sanders found at one singing and foraging in a pine tree on his Breeding Bird Survey route through Anson County on June 4, 2016. The last one had been reported on that route in 1969.

This warbler is occasionally found on local Christmas Bird Counts. It is irregular here during the winter. At this season, it is often seen traveling with mixed songbird flocks or visiting backyard bird feeder stations.

Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in only one survey block for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as an “imperiled” breeding bird that is especially vulnerable to extirpation.



Black-and-white Warbler foraging. (Will Stuart)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)