

## Prairie Warbler *Setophaga discolor*



**Folk Name:** Scrub Warbler

**Status:** Breeder

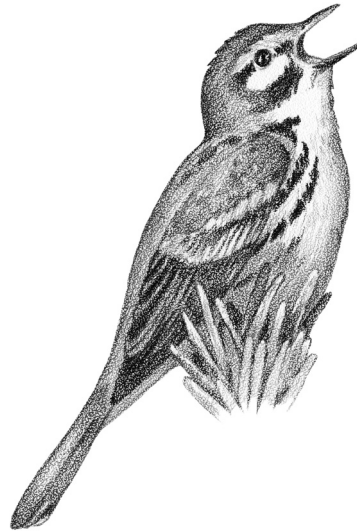
**Abundance:** Uncommon to Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Open fields, right-of-ways

The Prairie Warbler is a neotropical migrant that breeds in shrubby habitats in much of the United States, primarily east of the Mississippi River. It does best in large open expanses of early successional habitat, like abandoned fields with only scattered canopy or sapling trees. It is also regularly found nesting in large utility right-of-ways. This warbler winters along the southeast coast and in Florida, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and the Greater Antilles.

The amount of early successional habitat available for this species changes as the landscape changes over time. Historically, prairies were an important component of the Carolina Piedmont. Early European explorers in this region reported finding large expanses of “fertile prairies...with peavine, grass and canebrakes...Not a tree, and scarce a shrub could be seen.” Early maps labelled much of the Central Carolina region as *Savanae*, which is Latin for “prairie.” Bison once roamed these prairies. Grazing by bison and fires set by American Indians or sparked by lightning, helped maintain these extensive open lands. Unfortunately, little, if any, of this original habitat still exists. The Bison are long gone, wildfires are suppressed, and Prairie Warblers must rely solely on man to maintain areas with enough open habitat to be suitable for their nesting.

Leverett Loomis reported the Prairie Warbler as a common nesting bird in Chester County in the late 1870s. The area had lots of abandoned fields at the time. E.M. Hoffman and Elmer Brown observed Prairie Warblers in Rowan County during breeding season in the early 1920s. In 1926, Elmer Brown discovered a Prairie Warbler nest on



17 May and wrote the following in a letter to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum: “The Prairie seems to be a fairly common summer resident here. I found two nests near Davidson, Mecklenburg County. One on May 20, 1925 contained five fresh eggs. The other on May 24, 1925 contained one fresh egg. One of the eggs in the nest which contained five had the wreath [a pigment ring] around its smaller end. I have this egg.”

Maurice Stimson provided this account of finding Prairie Warbler nests in 1928: “while hunting during the winter...I came on an old field just over the Iredell County line in Rowan County, near Cool Spring, that had a number of these nests long since deserted. These were clinging to the sweet gums, shagbark elm and dogwood sprouts...the birds come back to this same spot year after year.”

William McIlwaine recorded the spring arrival of the Prairie Warbler in Charlotte on 1 April in 1929 and a fall departure date of 8 September in 1930. Charlie Sellers found a nest with three eggs in Charlotte on May 23, 1939, and noted this bird as a common local breeder. Sellers’ latest sighting of a Prairie Warbler in the fall of 1939 was a bird observed on 22 September. In the 1950s, John Trott reported the Prairie Warbler had become “one of the commonest warblers in the section” in Stanly County. He found active nests in winged elm and sweetgum saplings in overgrown fields through early July.

Prairie Warblers usually arrive in this region in April and leave by early October. Our earliest spring date on file is a report of a bird seen by Robin Carter in Chesterfield County on March 26, 2008. We have one additional report from late March. A Prairie Warbler was reported



*Prairie Warbler. (John Scavetto)*

on March 29, 2004, at Worth Mountain in York County. Our latest fall departure on file is 23 October. Our peak one-day count is 36 birds tallied on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count held on May 1, 1965.

We have two reports from the winter months. Taylor Piephoff spotted a Prairie Warbler at the Hidden Valley Ecological Preserve in Charlotte from 4 December through 22 December in 2007. This bird was relocated and photographed by several birders. This sighting provided an extremely rare confirmation of a Prairie Warbler present in the Carolina Piedmont during the winter. Photographer Barry Rowan reported a Prairie Warbler in Charlotte on December 7, 2013. He wrote: "I just had an unexpected visitor to the backyard bird feeders. A lone Prairie Warbler landed on the mixed seed feeder, nosed around, flew to the ground then left."

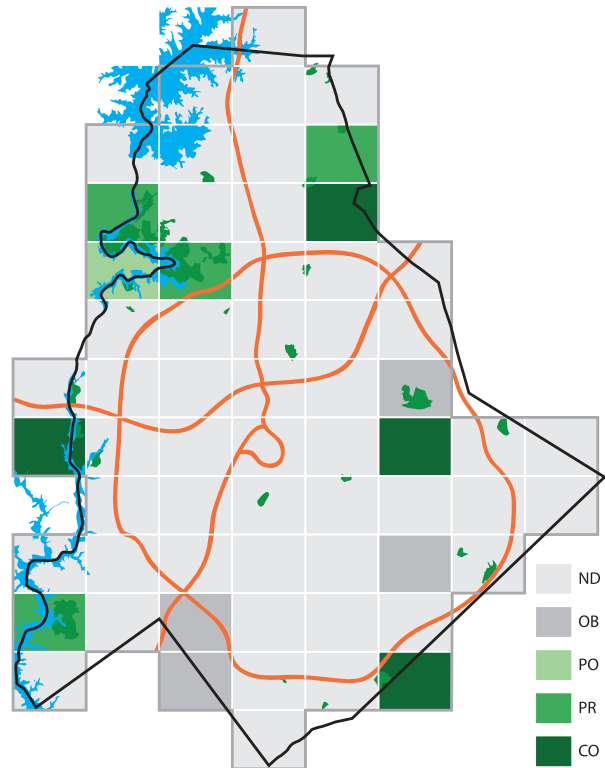
Prairie Warblers display strong fidelity to their breeding site. The MAPS bird banding station at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge documented a male Prairie Warbler returning to the same breeding spot for five consecutive years. The bird was captured in the exact same banding net several different years. This habitat was being maintained in an early successional state using periodic prescribed fire.

Two Prairie Warbler nests were identified and monitored by staff during a Mecklenburg County nest success study. One nest was parasitized by a Brown-headed Cowbird, and the parents raised the cowbird instead of their own young. The nestlings in the second nest were killed by a predator, possibly a raccoon. Nest success studies focused solely on this species indicate an average 23% rate of successful fledging per season.

The Prairie Warbler is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It

is in need of conservation action.

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.



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
*Local (PR/4, CO/4)*