

Swainson's Warbler *Limnothlypis swainsonii*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant and local Breeder

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Bottomland, floodplain forests with river cane

This small nondescript warbler is one of the most elusive warblers that regularly nests in the Carolinas. In both states, it breeds in the mountains, in dense rhododendron thickets beside streams, and in heavily vegetated swamps and canebrakes in the Coastal Plain. It is seldom found nesting in the Piedmont region.

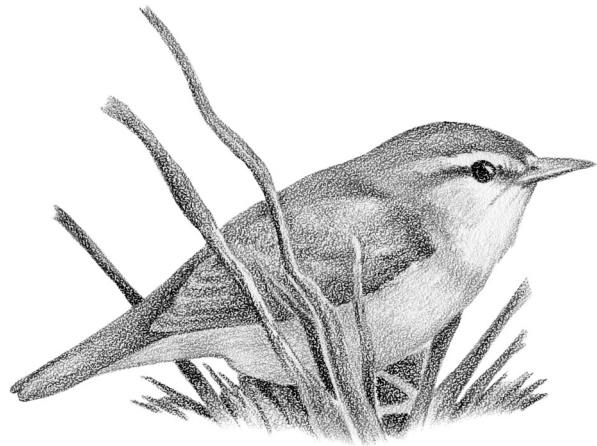
Leverett Loomis collected a male, a mile east of the Chester Court House on August 30, 1887, providing the first confirmation of the species in the Central Carolinas. At the time, the bird was only known from a few spots in the Coastal Plain of the Carolinas. He shared the excitement of his discovery in a published account in *The Auk* later that year:

The inland character of the place of capture, situate as it is on the water-shed between the Broad and Catawba Rivers, in the heart of the Piedmont Region, one hundred and fifty miles from the coast, renders this find of special interest. While it establishes nothing definitely beyond the mere fact of the occurrence of a single bird—perhaps accidental—during the time of migration, it awakens the mind to the possibility of an Up-Country habitat yet awaiting discovery, where the true centre of abundance will finally be located.

Loomis' words were prophetic as Swainson's Warbler was discovered in the mountains of North Carolina in the early 1930s and biologists confirmed breeding in the mountains of both North and South Carolina in the 1960s. It was later found breeding in a few isolated spots in the Piedmont of both states as well.

There were a handful of reports of Swainson's Warbler in the Central Carolinas during the twentieth century. A Swainson's Warbler was reported in Charlotte during fall migration on September 22, 1942. On June 16, 1970, at Jacobs Fork in the South Mountains (in Burke County), Mark Simpson attracted a singing male into viewing range by playing a recording of its song.

A Swainson's Warbler was reported on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on April 28, 1973. Three observers reported both seeing and hearing the bird, and they confirmed their identification after comparing the song they heard in the field to a recording. Dick Brown collected a specimen of a Swainson's Warbler at the base of a Charlotte television tower on October 11, 1978. Robin



Carter found one in Chester County on April 28, 1996.

In the 1980s and 1990s, singing males were found at several locations in Rutherford County (Chimney Rock, Bat Cave Preserve, South Mountain area) and along Jacob Fork River in southeastern Burke County—where it flows into Catawba County. In 1984, Charlie Wooten reported at least two singing in Lancaster County on 9 June. In 2000, Bill Hilton Jr. banded two Swainson's Warblers in neighboring York County: one on 7 May and the other on 18 May. They were carefully examined, and both were found to be in breeding condition.

There have been more than two dozen reports of Swainson's Warbler around the region since the turn of the twenty-first century. This species has been reported in Fairfield, Chester, Chesterfield, Lancaster, Cherokee, and York counties in South Carolina, and it has been seen in Mecklenburg and Anson counties and at South Mountain State Park and Game Lands in North Carolina.

Today, Swainson's Warbler nests on the extreme western edge and eastern edge of this region. Birds have been seen regularly and photographed during consecutive breeding seasons near Gaddy's covered bridge at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge. Swainson's Warbler is also believed to still breed sparingly along the western border of the region in "laurel hells" (rhododendron thickets) of the South Mountain area (both the game lands and state park) of northwestern Cleveland County, Burke County, and westward, usually below 3,000 feet.

From 2006 through 2009, male Swainson's Warblers appeared to be "on territory" at various sites in Charlotte including the Charlotte Airport, McAlpine Creek Greenway, Beaverdam Creek, and at Six Mile Creek Greenway south of Charlotte. In each location, the habitat was dense floodplain understory. It was full of privet and

there were also several remnant patches of river cane which was once densely distributed along primary river corridors in this area. On May 22, 2006, two Swainson's Warblers were found singing at Six Mile Creek Greenway in Charlotte. Taylor Piephoff wrote: "I suspect there are females present and nesting is underway." A third singing

Swainson's Warbler was found by a group of local birders at McAlpine Creek Greenway on the same day. The bird also appeared to be on territory. In 2007, there were multiple sightings into the month of June. Birds were reported in 2008 and 2009. Together, these sightings strongly suggest nesting occurred in Mecklenburg County.