

Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*



Folk Name: Pompey, Whistling Canary

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Early successional fields, briar thickets along woodland edges

The Yellow-breasted Chat was chosen as the namesake of the journal of the Ornithological Society of the Carolinas because it is one of the most common and one of our most beautiful summer resident birds. It is also our largest and, at times, one of our more noticeable breeding warblers. At 7 ½ inches in length, this warbler is just an inch smaller than our common Gray Catbird.

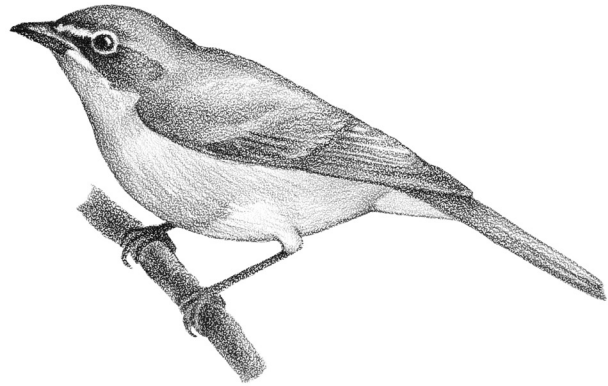
The Yellow-breasted Chat is perhaps the least “warbler-like” of our warblers. In fact, a decision was recently made to place it in its own separate family. It is relatively big with a long tail and a thick bill, and it is known for being quite loud—though often hard to see—on its breeding territory. It has broken white spectacles, a white whisker mark, and a bright yellow throat and breast. Its song is a strange mix of garbled notes, calls, and squawks, which have been described locally as “grotesque.” It is known to often sing at night.

On April 4, 1908, *The Gastonia Gazette* shared with local readers a piece from *St. Nicholas Magazine* that described this unusual warbler:

The oddities of the yellow breasted chat begin even with his classification. To think of a warbler the size of a Baltimore oriole, a warbler with a song like a mocking bird! Indeed, there is little about the chat that is not remarkable. He goes in for the weird and spectacular. If Nature designed him to show



Yellow-breasted Chat. (Jeff Lemons)



what she could do in the way of the unusual and the eccentric, she had remarkable success. ...A wild tangle of briars and vines is a favorite haunt. It is only better to survey such a retreat that he mounts to the top of a tree. From this lofty perch he sings to the amazement and bewilderment of the person that hears the song for the first time. More likely than not he will become invisible and silent upon the first attempt to approach him, remaining quiet and hidden till you move on again; then he chuckles loudly and scolds and spits and scoffs till you are out of sight and hearing. No bird is so fearful of being seen or such a master of hide and seek.

In 1911, the *Statesville Record and Landmark* reported this curious local anecdote about the Yellow-breasted Chat:

Mr. Clark [of Fallstown township] always has something interesting to show or to tell about the birds or the “wild creeturs” of field and wood, and this time he exhibited three last season’s bird nests. All of these nests had been started with beech leaves and then neatly woven with grass. ...Mr. Clark was sent to Mr. R.B. McLaughlin, who knows about such things. Mr. McLaughlin says the bird is the yellow-breasted chat. While Mr. Clark didn’t know the name of the birds he says they use the beech leaves as a protection from lightning, for in all his life he never knew a beech tree to be struck by lightning.

The Concord Daily Tribune highlighted the peculiarities of the breeding flight of the Yellow-breasted Chat on May 18, 1920:

When these birds sing their musical effort seems to require a great deal of flirting of the tail and twisting of the head; and even when they are flying their tail jerks up and down, giving them a strange appearance.

After this dramatic wing-flapping, tail-jerking breeding display, the male drops straight back down into the thicket from where he began.

On June 24 1926, William McIlwaine found the nest of a Yellow-breasted Chat in Charlotte and later wrote: "And chats' nests are becoming so common as hardly to cause remark. I am finding three or four long white eggs spotted somewhat irregularly with cinnamon. But the chat himself is a wonder. And always more or less near is his companion the Maryland Yellow Throat." On June 2, 1930, he reported:

Out on a ditch bank I found the characteristic nest of the chat. It distressed the parents very much, but I had to take a look inside. There were three very much mottled eggs in a nest constructed only fairly well, and placed six feet up in small young trees. Usually the chat will build somewhat lower than this.

The following day, he found another nest "at an elevation of two or three feet, containing three or four little birds several days old."

Members of the Statesville Audubon Club reported finding several active Yellow-breasted Chat nests and Prairie Warbler nests on their outing to the McLaughlin farm on June 10, 1931. Elizabeth Clarkson reported that Yellow-breasted Chats occasionally visited Charlotte's Wing Haven garden during the 1943 nesting season and stated they "evidently have nests near-by." A year later she reported this bird "begins to build about May 5."

The diet of the Yellow-breasted Chat is comprised mostly of insects and spiders, but these warblers also love to eat fruit like wild grapes, blackberries, pokeberries,

and elderberries. Verne E. Davison, with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, collected a Yellow-breasted Chat in Charlotte on July 21, 1939. He examined the contents of its stomach and determined it had been eating the berries of a newly introduced exotic shrub *Elaeagnus umbellata*, commonly called Autumn Olive. Today, this shrub is widely reviled as one of the most invasive plants in this region, but it does provide a good food source for many of our local birds.

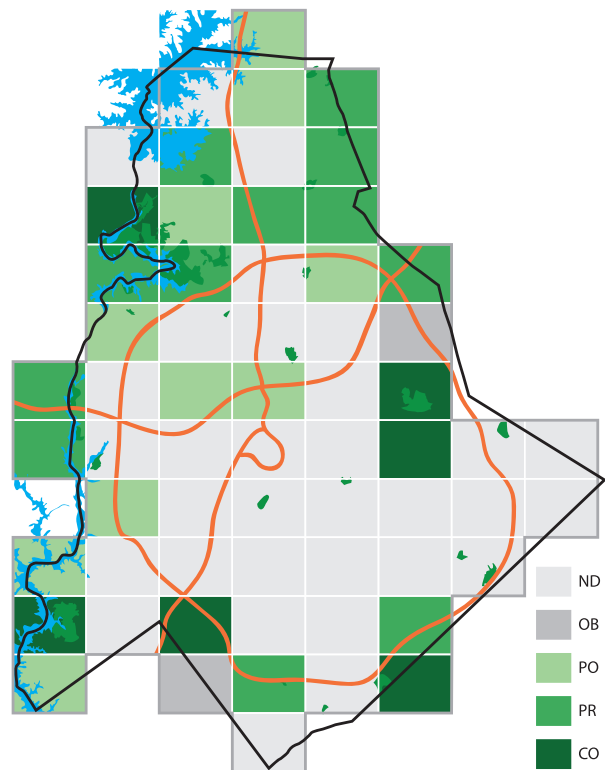
We have records of this bird in the region during every month of the year. Most birds arrive in April and depart by the middle of October. They have been recorded on almost every Spring Bird Count conducted in the region. Our highest one-day count is 32 birds tallied on a Spring Bird Count in 1965.

After breeding season, most Yellow-breasted Chats migrate south to winter in southern Mexico and Central America. Migrants from breeding sites far to our north move through this region each spring and fall. A total of seven Yellow-breasted Chats were killed during migration at the Charlotte airport after hitting the ceilometer tower there on the night of September 25, 1955. One was collected at the base of the WSOC television tower in east Charlotte on October 17, 1959. Four dead specimens were collected at this tower during the first week of October 1960.

Occasionally, a Yellow-breasted Chat will be found in this region during the winter months. One was reported



Yellow-breasted Chat nest. (MCPRD staff)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/12, CO/6)

by Mrs. K.M. Peeler to be regularly visiting a feeder in Charlotte from December 22, 1966, through March 12, 1967. On December 7, 1985, David Wright sighted one in Pineville. One was found sick in Charlotte on December 5, 1999. It later died, and the specimen was turned over to the North Carolina Museum. Another was found at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge during the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count on December 18, 2005. Patric Patterson photographed one visiting his feeder on February 8, 2014.

So, why does the Yellow-breasted Chat sing at night? The results from one recent research study have surprised everyone. Apparently, the female Yellow-breasted Chat can be quite promiscuous. Faculty with the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences in Illinois, attached radio transmitters to 32 nesting birds and tracked their movements. Males are active at night singing and looking to copulate—the male sings a low song to attract a wayward female, so they can “hook up.”

Females sneak away from their nests during the night to visit the territory of other males. One professor said that studying these bird's behavior was like watching a “soap opera.”

In 2001, MCPRD implemented a nest success study to learn more about the perils faced by birds nesting in local fields. A total of nine Yellow-breasted Chat nests were monitored. Over half (56%) of the nests were depredated, 11% of the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, and only 33% of the nests successfully fledged any young. Recaptures of banded birds at MAPS and other banding stations indicate a strong tendency for these birds to return to their same breeding site year after year.

Loss of early successional habitat preferred by the Yellow-breasted Chat has led to a decline in breeding in Mecklenburg County. Data from the recent BBA study shows this once common breeding warbler is now a “somewhat local” breeder in the county.