

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata*

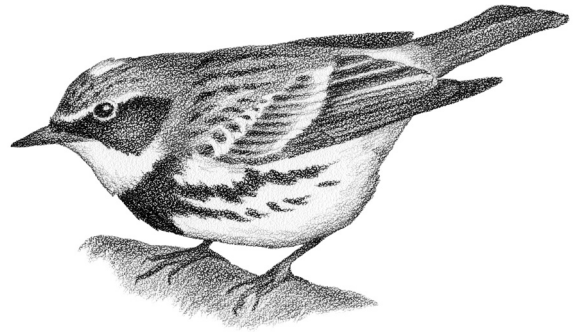


Folk Name: Butterbutt, Myrtlebird, Myrtle Warbler

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident

Abundance: Common to Very Common

Habitat: Forests, edge habitat, parks, residential areas, feeders



At times, the Yellow-rumped Warbler can be a bit difficult to identify as males and females are found in a variety of molts and plumages throughout the year. In each of these plumages, however, this warbler always has a noticeable yellow rump.

“I had a deal of perplexity with one bird. Copious notes at least crystallized my thinking. And finally I was sure—it was the myrtle warbler. This bird is a winter resident. But I find that all but his rump yellow are much obscured until well into the Spring. But when you have gotten him straight there are plenty others of his species.”

—William McIlwaine, Charlotte, March 20, 1928

The Yellow-rumped Warbler is our most abundant warbler. It can usually be seen in the Carolina Piedmont from September through May. It can be found moving through in fairly large numbers during the peak of spring and fall migration. Our earliest recorded arrival date is 9 August, and our latest departure date is 19 June. The June bird was seen in York County and may have been a non-breeding wanderer. We have had single day tallies of close to 500 individuals on local Christmas Bird Counts and the Yellow-rumped Warbler ranks as one of our top 10 birds recorded on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count when indexed per party-hour.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, this warbler expanded its breeding range south into North Carolina. It was first found in West Virginia in 1975, in Virginia in 1992, and at Roan Mountain, NC-TN, in 1993. Since that time, breeding season sightings have been reported at high elevation sites south to Clingman’s Dome.

To many, this bird is fondly known as the “Butter-butt,” because its yellow rump patch looks very much like a “pat” of butter. This bird species has also been called the “Myrtle” Warbler as it often feeds on the berries of wax myrtle. It was once designated an entirely separate species from its western counterpart (race), the “Audubon’s” Warbler. In 1973, taxonomists “lumped” the two birds together into a single species called the Yellow-rumped Warbler. Recent genetic research has led taxonomists to consider “splitting” these two back into distinct species once again.

Beatrice Potter collected a specimen of a male Yellow-rumped Warbler in Charlotte on February 22, 1942, and



sent it to C.S. Brimley for the collection at the North Carolina State Museum. It is still available for examination in the collection today.

Birders often bemoan the number of Butterbutts they have to “wade through” during spring migration to find “a decent warbler” to view. They often dread the arrival of these birds in the fall as well. On September 30, 1999, one local birder wrote: “Not to be the bearer of bad news, but we had our first Yellow-rumped Warblers this evening at Lookout Shoals Lake. There were two of them, an adult and an immature. Oh well, you knew they had to come back sometime.”

Yellow-rumps also irritate backyard feeder watchers as small flocks may dominate a particular feeder in late winter or early spring, chasing away other birds. There were so many moving through the Central Carolinas in 2007, that Ken Kneidel, a President of the Mecklenburg Audubon Society, sponsored a contest to see who would



Yellow-rumped Warbler. (Will Stuart)

report the last Yellow-rumped Warbler that spring. He wrote: "I, too, longed for their disappearance that year, but quickly had second thoughts, as I recorded in this poem:"

Sweet little bird,
Your numbers grow,
Until I yearn,
For you to go.

But now you're gone,
And my eyes shut,
And dream of you,
My butter-butt.

Birder Carolyn Russert quickly countered with this version:

Sweet little bird,
Your numbers grow,
Now I wait to see you go.

Now you're gone and this I'll share,
Your coming back is my nightmare.