

First Sighting – Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Yellow Warbler



Moses Martin

## Warblers – Seasonal Visitors and Summer Breeders

Warblers are a diverse group of primarily insect-eating (insectivorous) birds. Most of these species migrate in the spring from the tropics and subtropics to breed in the temperate zone of North America. While some species breed in Northern Virginia, such as Common Yellowthroats, Prothonotary and Yellow Warblers, Northern Parulas, and Ovenbirds, others stop in the area in the spring or fall to refuel before continuing their journeys. Adequate habitat in their stopover points is proving to be just as important to warbler conservation as protection of their breeding and wintering grounds. During migration, you are likely to encounter Waterthrushes, Black-and-white, Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted, and Blackpoll Warblers in your neighborhood and nearby parks. In winter, Northern Virginia hosts Yellow-rumped, Pine and stray Palm Warblers.

### What Warblers Need

**Food:** Warblers are strongly insectivorous and show an array of feeding behaviors among species, so a multi-layered landscape of diverse native plant species will host the highest diversity of insects and will, thus, provide food for the highest diversity of warblers. Our wintering warblers rely on waxy berries during the winter. Warblers are also strongly drawn to streams, wetlands and other water sources.



Patricia Velte

### How You Can Help

- Spring flowering plants provide a buffet of insects for warblers arriving in April and May. Consider spicebush, chokeberry, and high bush blueberry. Bayberry, also a spring flowerer, sumac and juniper provide fruits for Yellow-rumped Warblers in fall and winter. Serviceberry, river birch, common hackberry, beech, black gum, pitch pine and Virginia pine add quality to the canopy and understory year-round.
- Caged, starling-proof, suet feeders provide food for fall migrants and winter residents.
- Avoid using pesticides, which greatly diminish the number of insects available to hungry migrants and fast-growing nestlings. Pesticides can also poison the birds.
- Add a water feature, such as a small pond, to attract these water-loving birds to your property. Moving water is especially attractive
- On balconies and small patios, small potted shrubs will attract birds that are accustomed to foraging high in treetops. A barrel-sized “pond” will also provide needed water.

**Breeding:** Though nest placement varies, many species nest on or close to the ground, constructing cup or dome-shaped nests of grass, dead leaves, plant fibers, bark strips and other fine materials. Ground nests are often tucked into clumps of grass or dead leaves.

- Plant native clumping grasses such as switch grass, little blue stem, and Indian grass, and shrubs such as smooth alder, silky dogwood, and viburnum for above-ground nesting places.
- Allow some leaves to accumulate to provide additional locations and materials for nesting.



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**Shelter:** Migrating, breeding and wintering warblers are drawn to dense vegetation in part because it helps protect them from predators.

- Create layers of vegetation by planting canopy trees, understory trees, shrubs, and grasses, as recommended above.
- Build a brush shelter. Ovenbirds are especially attracted to this type of habitat and may use it as a stopover shelter or as a breeding site.

**Other:** The domestic cat is one of the main predators of wild birds in developed areas. Domestic cats kill millions of birds each year in the United States.

Brown-headed Cowbirds, native to the United States, are nest parasites, meaning they lay their eggs in the nests of other species and let the hosts raise their young, instead of raising their own. Brown-headed Cowbirds have expanded their range as forests have been converted to open or developed landscapes, in effect shrinking intact forest and enabling cowbirds to reach more host nests.

- Keep your cat indoors. Birds and your cat's health will be protected. Indoor cats have a lower risk of exposure to harmful chemicals and diseases and are much less likely to get fleas, ticks, and worms.
- If your property borders a forest, you can effectively expand that forest by planting native trees and shrubs adjacent to it in your yard, incrementally increasing safe warbler breeding habitat that was once lost to development. Choose tree species based on the neighboring forest type.

**Resources:**

Plants—available at Nature By Design, DeBaggio Herbs, Merrifield Garden Center and other local nurseries

Pond liners—available at local home improvement stores

**Model Warbler Habitats:**

Manassas Battlefield Park—[www.nps.gov/mana/naturescience/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/mana/naturescience/index.htm)

Riverbend Park—[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/)

Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge—[www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611)

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