

I n s i d e : D o n o r A w a r d s N i g h t

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Bruce Trail

M A G A Z I N E

A close-up photograph of a yellow and black warbler perched on a thin, dark branch. The bird has a bright yellow face and chest, with a black cap and throat. Its wings and back are a muted yellow-green. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and blue.

Explore a
Wave of
Warblers



Bruce Trail
CONSERVANCY

Canada Warbler

*Inset on facing page is the
Blackburnian Warbler.*

*All photos by Robert MacCaw,
unless otherwise noted.*





Wave of Warblers

By Chris Earley

I love spring. Trilliums blooming, chorus frogs and spring peepers calling, the smell of the first real spring shower; I cherish these moments every year. But spring also means one important thing. Warbler migration. This is what I wait for most. These little migrants with their energetic movements and myriad of colour combinations make them one of the most popular bird groups for birdwatching North Americans.

Your Field Guide

The best aid to help the beginner identify warblers (besides a pair of binoculars and a lot of patience!) is a field guide to birds. There are many different field guides to choose from: some use photographs, some have paintings, some cover all of North America and some only cover the eastern part. If you don't already have one, it is important to compare field guides and pick one that you think will be the most helpful for you to identify birds in the field. As well, there are great field guide apps for your handheld device. The best ones include sound recordings of the birds' songs, which can be very helpful in the field.

How do I know it's a warbler?

Except for the Yellow-breasted Chat, North American warblers are small birds with thin, pointed beaks. For the beginner, separating vireos and warblers can be challenging. Look up vireos in your field guide and notice that they have stronger-looking beaks than the warblers. This is a difficult distinguishing feature to see, so keep vireos in mind when you are trying to identify a "warbler" and can't seem to find it in your book. Other confusing species that look like warblers are kinglets and small flycatchers. With practice, you will start to notice that these birds are quite different from warblers in regards to shape and behaviour.

When and where to look for warblers.

The month of May is the best time to see the biggest variety of warblers because that is when most of them are migrating north to their breeding grounds. Most warbler migration occurs at night, so often the best time to find warblers is in the morning when they are feeding to refuel after a long flight. Any forest at this time could be full of feeding warblers, often called a "wave of warblers." Usually the side of a forest getting the morning sun is the most productive; the sun's warmth causes the warblers' main food source, insects, to become active and easier for them to find.



Warblers come in a variety of flavours. We will focus on spring male warblers because they have the flashiest plumage and they sing. Many female warblers are quite often muted images of their showy mates, so if you can learn what the males look like, you'll find that recognizing the females will be easier as you gain experience. And because the males sing, they are a lot more obvious; you can find them in the foliage by using your eyes AND your ears. Their singing alerts you to their presence when otherwise you might hike right past them. We will cover 19 of the over 30 species that can be found along the Bruce Trail.

Remember not to get frustrated when trying to identify these birds. Use the following phrase when you need to. "I don't know"

Really, it's O.K.! Too many birders either get frustrated or make misidentifications. The reason you should identify a bird is to be able to learn more about it, not just check it off a checklist. Bird identification opens the door to reading about birds and watching for particular behaviours in the field. This will increase your

appreciation of birds and their habitats which in turn will help you understand how precious this planet and its occupants are.

Names

Many warbler names are very descriptive, such as Black-throated Blue Warbler. Others, such as Cape May Warbler, Magnolia Warbler and Palm Warbler, are not. Make up your



Magnolia Warbler



Yellow-rumped Warbler

Butterbutts – the yellow rumps

Yellow-rumped Warbler

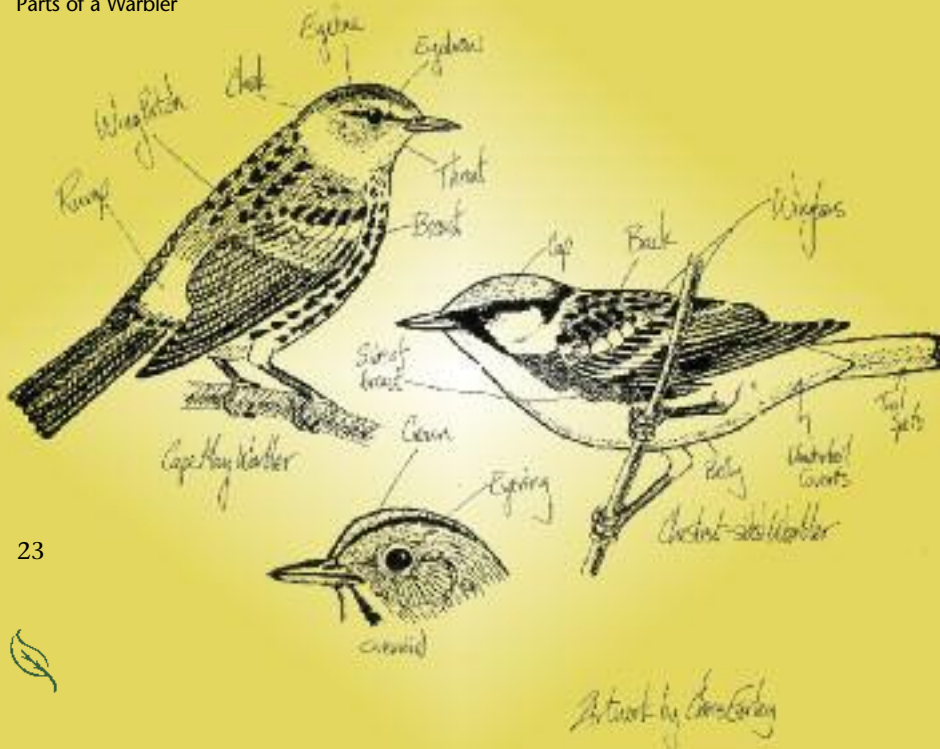
This is a very common spring migrant and one of only three warblers with a distinctly bright yellow rump, earning it the name "butterbutt". It has a white throat with black on its breast and sides which contrast with a large yellow spot on each side near the wings. This warbler also has white wingbars. Yellow-rumped Warblers are quite

own names if they help you remember what one species looks like. I've given some examples of "fun" names to start you off, but making your own can be very enjoyable.



Cape May Warbler

Parts of a Warbler



hardy warblers that can sometimes be found in southern Ontario during the winter (I think I would rather migrate south).

Magnolia Warbler

Magnolia Warblers and Yellow-rumped Warblers are often confusing for beginners because of their similar colours. However, the patterns are very different. The



Chestnut-sided Warbler



Mustard and ketchup – yellow breast and/or throat with reddish streaks

Yellow Warbler

This warbler is all yellow underneath and has olive-yellow upperparts. The male’s breast is streaked with red. The Yellow Warbler is a common breeding bird in southern Ontario and can be found anywhere along the Bruce Trail where there are moist open areas with small shrubs. Listen for its “sweet, sweet, shredded wheat” song.

Palm Warbler

Where the Yellow Warbler is often in thick shrubs and small trees, the Palm Warbler can sometimes be found right on the ground, too. It has a rusty cap and brownish back and yellow undertail coverts. If you do find this warbler hopping about on the ground in an open area such as a lawn, note that it is constantly bobbing its tail, another good identification feature.

Magnolia Warbler has a yellow breast with black streaks instead of a white breast with black. Also, the Magnolia Warbler has large white wing patches instead of two distinct wingbars. One of the first specimens of this warbler was shot in some magnolia trees in Mississippi by Alexander Wilson. Wilson originally called this warbler the “black-and-yellow warbler” which is obviously more descriptive and easier to remember!

Yellow Warbler



Chestnut on sides

Chestnut-sided Warbler

With its yellow cap, white throat, chestnut sides and black “moustache”, the Chestnut-sided Warbler is fairly distinctive. It and the Bay-breasted Warbler are part of a group of warblers called “confusing fall warblers” because their fall plumage is very drab, making identification quite a challenge.

Palm Warbler



Cape May Warbler

This warbler’s species name is *tigrina*, which describes its tiger-like striping. It can be distinguished from the other “butterbutts” by the yellow patch on the side of its neck and the chestnut patch on its cheek. This warbler has the largest clutch size of any warbler - up to 9 eggs in years during a spruce budworm outbreak. Most warblers have clutches of 4-5 eggs.

Bay-breasted Warbler

This migrant is different from the Chestnut-sided Warbler in that it has a dark chestnut throat and a buffy patch on the side of its neck. It has two very white wingbars and is rather sluggish compared to the hyperactive movements of most other warbler species.





Hallowe'en Warblers – black and orange

Blackburnian Warbler

The brightness of the male Blackburnian Warbler's orange throat is an incredible sight and is a super field mark. Getting a good look at one is much easier during migration when all of the leaves in the forest canopy haven't unfolded yet. Once it is on its breeding grounds, which includes

American Redstart



Black and Blues

Black-throated Blue Warbler

This is the warbler that really got me hooked on birding. I saw one in my backyard when I was fourteen and couldn't believe that a bird could be so beautiful. This is the only warbler with a black throat and blue upperparts and is often found low enough in trees that it can be seen well.

Blackburnian Warbler



the northern part of the Bruce Trail, it can be very hard to find unless it is singing its high-pitched song from the very top of a tall tree.

American Redstart

This warbler likes to show off its orange by spreading its wings and tail and hopping along a branch in exaggerated movements. American Redstarts are also conspicuous because they tend to like open second-growth woodland and can often be seen catching flying insects in mid-air.

Black-throated Blue Warbler



Cerulean Warbler

This is one of our warblers that you really want to watch for. Not only does it have gorgeous blue upperparts, it is now considered an endangered species in Canada. Habitat loss in both its breeding grounds and its wintering ground (South America) is thought to be the cause of its decline. Cerulean Warblers have a white throat and dark streaks as opposed to the Black-throated Blue's black throat and black sides.

Yellow Cheeks

Black-throated Green Warbler

This warbler has green upperparts, a black throat, yellow cheeks and two prominent wingbars. It has been observed that the males and females of many species of warblers actually feed in different parts of a tree during the breeding season; this reduces competition for food.

Black-throated Green Warbler



Cerulean Warbler



The Zebra Warbler

Black-and-white Warbler

The Black-and-white Warbler is distinctive among warblers in that it behaves very much like a nuthatch, creeping along the trunks of trees and branches while foraging for insects in the bark. This warbler certainly lives up to its name. It has a black throat and its whole body is streaked with black and white. This leads to the

Black-and-white Warbler



Male Black-throated Green Warblers, for example, tend to forage higher than females in summer.

Hooded Warbler

Another well-named warbler, this guy's black hood really makes his yellow cheeks stand out. The Hooded Warbler is a threatened species in Canada. It likes to stay low in mature forests where you might get to see it flash the white in its tail while it is looking for food.

Hooded Warbler

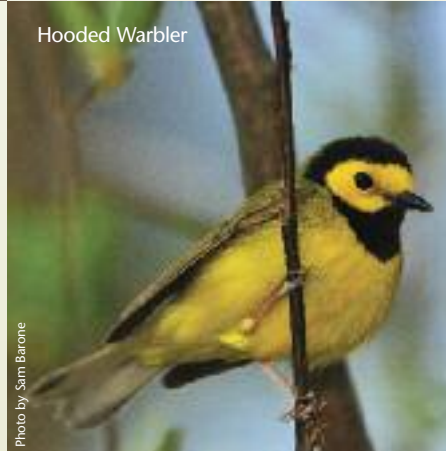


Photo by Sam Barone

obvious question: Is it black with white streaks or white with black streaks? Hmmm.

Thrush-like Warblers

Ovenbird

This warbler and the next one have similar markings and habits to thrushes (robin-like birds with brown backs and spotted breasts). The Ovenbird is an olive-brown warbler with white underparts dotted with dark markings. Its crown





Ovenbird



Photo by Terry Sehl

is orange with dark borders and it has an eye-ring. Ovenbirds are more often heard than seen; their song is a loud "teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher!" It gets the name Ovenbird because its ground nest is domed with an opening on the side, like a Dutch oven.

Northern Waterthrush

This warbler is most often seen foraging for aquatic insects along the edges of woodland ponds. It has a habit of constantly bobbing its tail

as it walks, making it look like it is keeping the beat to some unheard music. The white eyebrow and lack of an eye-ring help distinguish this warbler from the Ovenbird.

The Lone Ranger Warbler

Common Yellowthroat

The Common Yellowthroat prefers wet open areas such as damp, scrubby fields and marshes. Its song is likened to "wichity, wichity, wichity, wich" and is a common sound in

Common Yellowthroat



Northern Waterthrush



southern Ontario marshes. Its distinctive black mask should never leave you with the question of "who was that masked warbler?"

Just visiting the Music City

Nashville Warbler

The Nashville Warbler has a white eye-ring, blue-grey head, yellow throat and yellow underparts. Alexander Wilson named this warbler in 1811 when he saw this bird just outside of Nashville, Tennessee. It is a bit of strange name for a war-



bler that only passes through the Nashville area during migration.

Warbler with a Black Cap

Wilson's Warbler

The small green and yellow Wilson's Warbler appears to be wearing a black beanie or yarmulke. This warbler commonly catches insects in mid-air, earning it one of its old names, the Green Black-capped Fly-catcher.

Warbler with a necklace

Canada Warbler

The Canada Warbler has slate-blue upperparts and yellow underparts. The male's black necklace makes this warbler look similar to the Magnolia

Warbler but the Canada Warbler does not have a yellow-rump or white wing patch. Both the Canada Warbler and the Wilson's Warbler are often seen in low shrubbery in moist woodlands.

These are only a sample of the variety of warblers in Ontario in May and anywhere on the Bruce Trail could harbor a flock of these butterflies of the bird world. If you are patient and persistent you'll find that you can learn what quite a few of them are in one spring season. Once you start watching warblers, you'll be waiting for their return each spring. And they're worth the wait! •

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Canada Warbler



Guelph's Arboretum. He offers many wildlife workshops including two on warblers (go to www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum for details) and has written a book called *Warblers of the Great Lakes Region and Eastern North America*.

Nashville Warbler

