

# Warblers: Avian Jewels of the Hudson Watershed

Though Robins may hold the title of “harbingers of spring”, to the year around birder, there is nothing more exciting to the birding community than the arrival of the warblers. Though some hearty birds may winter-over eating suet from bird feeders, most cannot survive our cold winters and migrate south in the fall. In the spring dozens of varieties of these avian jewels move north, traveling thousands of miles from their wintering grounds in South America, Latin America and the West Indies through North America to nest here in the vast Hudson watershed and in Canada.

Warblers are energetic songbirds. Most in the Northeast are of the family Parulidae or wood-warblers. Smaller than robins, they are found in trees, shrubs and the forest floor. They are voracious eaters, flitting from branches and turning over dead leaves looking for mites, spiders, worms and insects to devour with small pointed beaks. In the spring, male birds have distinctive plumage for breeding. Though those which habituate the forest floor are in muted browns, though camouflaged are none the less handsome. The mature birds in the trees are in bright yellows, reds, greens and flashy combinations, but it is often difficult to identify individual immature juvenile birds from females.

A good pair of binoculars, field guide, smart phone app, and spotting scope can help in making positive identifications. However, during mating season one characteristic of these avian jewels is distinctive, their songs. Yes, many species have multiple songs which can be heard, loud and clear, in woodlands, streams, lakes and rivers. Many birders consider hearing a bird's call as positive identification without a sighting.

With that, a journal for recording your sightings is recommended. Trying to remember a spotted warbler is almost impossible, so writing down what was seen, when, where, and how will not only give you a personal list and recording but it will add to your reference. For example, from my journal on my iphone, I saw a Palm Warbler on April 21, 2018 in Harriman State Park. The listing shows the exact location on a map. So I know I can go back to that location on that date and, hopefully, see that bird again this year. I will write more on recording and journaling in the future.

Getting an early start in spring can reap rewards when looking for warblers. One advantage is there are no leaves on the trees. It is amazing how arriving warblers stand out against the browns and grays of pre-leaved trees only to disappear into the greenery

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as nests are built. Even the Ovenbird, this oddly named warbler, can be seen raking the forest floor for tasty morsels. Different species have different eating habits. One of the earliest is the black and white warbler. A striped gem which combs tree trunks branches looking for mites and newly hatching insects. It is often mistaken for the female downy woodpecker. Another early arrival is the aforementioned Palm Warbler, It has a rufous red cap and a spotted breast followed by a pine warbler with a song that defines warbling and the spectacular jewel, the American Redstart. The female and juvenile in yellow and black and the male in bright orangey red and black. Redstarts flit from branch to branch in an endless display of energy which allows no insect in its sight a chance.



For the novice birder discovering warblers can be both rewarding and confusing. As one's list of sightings grows, it is like many things in nature, the more you know, the more you don't know. I try to add to my list of sightings of warblers each year. In 2017, I was intent on seeing and photographing a reclusive Golden Winged Warbler. I might add that it is one thing to see a bird and another to get a presentable photo of it.

Networking is an important part of birding and I had word that there is a specific place in the Hudson Valley that is a habitat for nesting Golden Wings. Of course there are so many variables in hearsay information but sleuthing is part of birding. On the first day I arrived in the area to get the lay of the land and listen for birds in general. With my curiosity and research satisfied, I set out to establish a search perimeter looking for more specific habitat. Though there were other warblers, I heard and found nothing close to a Golden Winged . On the second day I encountered a few fellow birders who said that they thought that they had heard one but they weren't sure... no help. On the fifth day (i can't remember what happened on the third or fourth) my fifty or so mile track each day was wearing. I heard the bird. Or though I heard the bird! I decided to stay in one spot where the habitat looked promising and hoped that I might be able to zero in on the call. I started to hear the bird again and again as it became accustomed to my presence. That evening as I was about to leave, the bird appeared within a few feet and I was able to get the photograph included in this essay.

I have since seen a few more Golden Winged Warblers, but no sightings since have been as thrilling or satisfying as that evening. The Jewel was in its place and one wonders where this beautiful reclusive bird would nest if the habitat was lost.