

May Warblers--Woodland Jewels

By Lauren Shaffer

The month of May is exciting; the trees are leafing out, wildflowers abound, and the songbirds are coming through on the way to their breeding grounds. Pennsylvania is host to many of the 37 kinds of warblers that nest east of the Rockies. These are extremely active, tiny foragers of insects and caterpillars, and come in almost every color combination found on birds, though most have varying amounts of yellow. These Woodland Jewels each have their own niche, with some species preferring the ground or brush, and others at different levels of the trees. They tend to flock together in mixed species, but since they each have their own niche for feeding, they are able to forage together without threatening each other. My favorite strategy for finding them is to travel down a back road, and pull over when hearing or seeing a variety of birds in the trees. Trying to photograph these active little (five-inch) birds is quite the challenge, however.

The Common Yellowthroat is one of the first birds that I noticed before birding became a passion. I'll never forget disembarking from a canoe on the Beaver Creek in Ohio, walking around a shrub, and coming face to face with this tiny masked bandit! This olive-yellow bird with the bright yellow throat and breast and a black mask was my "spark bird," which awakened me to a new world of birding. This was its typical habitat, down low in a thicket near the creek. For such a tiny thing, it has a very lusty voice, singing "Whitchity, whitchity, whitch," throwing its head back and singing with abandon. To this day, I call it the "masked bandit." The female is much drabber with warm yellow on its throat and breast, but no mask.

The Ovenbird is another bird that prefers the ground or the understory. It got its name from the oven-shaped nest it makes out of leaves and fibers on the ground. The entrance is on the side. When driving down back roads in the forest, it's possible to hear several of these tiny warblers singing an extremely loud and emphatic "teacher, teacher, teacher!!" It has an orange crown stripe on an olive head and back with heavily streaked white breast and belly. It looks for food under dead leaves and logs.

A small bird that travels up and down the trunk and branches of a tree like a Nuthatch is the Black-and-white Warbler. It sounds like a squeaky wheel, "wee-see-wee-see-wee-see." As its name implies, it is an elegant bird with its stark black-and-white streaked appearance, as if it is wearing a tux! Its thin bill is made for probing crevices in the bark and plucking insects and spiders from the cracks.

The fluttering of an American Redstart, black above with bright orange patches on its fanned tail, wings, and sides, is reminiscent of a butterfly as the warbler sallies out to catch insects on the wing, just like a flycatcher. The female has yellow patches rather than neon orange but is also butterflylike. These warblers prefer second-growth woodlands.

The Northern Parula, a gorgeous bird of the mid and upper canopies, is blue-gray with a greenish-yellow patch on the back and bright yellow on the throat and chest, intersected by a chestnut-red breast band. It sings a buzzy ascending trill that reminds me of a zipper: "zee--- up!" They nest in the moss of Old Man's Beard in the north and in Spanish moss in the south. They've adapted to breeding in PA also, making hanging basket nests using grasses and leaves and other materials instead of hanging moss. I enjoy watching them in the lower campground at Kettle Creek where they sing their rising buzzy songs.

An easy warbler to find is the Yellow Warbler which sings its "Sweet, sweet, sweet; I'm so sweet" song from the trees in the park or in your yard. It's a bright yellow bird, but unlike the Goldfinch, it has no black on it. The male has varying degrees of red streaks on its breast, while the female may be a duller yellow.

These are but a few of the gorgeous woodland jewels of spring and summer! Other colorful PA warblers include the Black-throated Green, the Blackburnian or "fire-throat," Chestnut-sided, Hooded, and the rare Golden-winged Warbler. By taking to the back roads with your binoculars to look for these fluttering avian jewels, you just might find a whole new world out there to discover! Joining a bird walk with the local Audubon or park event is a great place to learn about our beautiful PA bird life.

Photos by the Author



