

VILLAGE VIEW

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Suddenly, and in spite of all those false starts, it's truly spring. Trees burst into chartreuse attire as their baby leaves unfurl; golden gleams of forsythia, jonquils, and daffodils spread cheerful brightness on every side; and birdsong awakens us at the first glimmer of dawn in the

eastern sky.

Along with all the growing signs of winter's passing, come those welcome melodies of returning birds, and among the busiest of our feathered friends are the warblers, the crown jewels of nature, so-called for their brilliant plumage.

Smaller than sparrows, restless and in almost constant motion, warblers flit among the twigs and branches of trees and shrubs in an endless search for insects and spiders to satisfy their hunger. Since most warblers migrate to South America or the Caribbean Islands each fall, they make their Cape Cod landfall in late May nearly exhausted and close to starvation.

After flights of more than 8,000 miles, in some instances, these tiny birds settle into our woodlands for the summer months and unwittingly provide birdwatchers a rainbow of fluttering life. Among the first warblers to arrive is a migrant headed, ultimately, for Nova Scotia: the Parula. The male is our only warbler with a blue back and a chestnut breastband.

Its yellow throat, breast, and eye-ring make identification certain.

Fast on the wings of the Parulas comes the blue-gray Goldenwing, with its black bib and earpatch, and golden crown and wings. Often found with it, the Bluewing closely resembles the Goldenwing, except that it lacks wings of gold and has, instead, an all yellow head and underparts, and bears a black line through its eyes.

Should you spot a warbler with a gray head, white eye ring, yellow underparts, and an olive-green back, it's probably a Nashville. Look for this warbler at the edge of woods, especially near water, in orchards, and among shade trees this time of year. It, too, is a migrant that nests in the north-east United States and the southeastern parts of Canada.

The Yellow warbler, true to its name, looks all yellow, but darker above, lighter below, with brown streaks along its sides; to distinguish this fellow from the American Goldfinch, remember the finch has black wings and tail.

Magnolia warbler wears a gray crown and wings, yellow rump and underparts, black earpatches, black back, and black streaks on breast and sides. This is the only warbler with an interrupted white band across the middle of its black tail.

A real beauty is the Black-Throated Blue; look for its small white wing-spot and white underparts, as well as for the black throat and slate-blue back.

Our only warbler wearing yellow on its rump and a white throat is the Myrtle. Another blue-grey little bird, its sides are heavily streaked with black, and it has a black cheekpatch and breastband. This is one of the few warblers that may winter over on Cape Cod, and you may have seen it at your feeder or in shrubbery eating bayberries.

Well-named is the Pine warbler who haunts the pine woods of the Cape. Sharp eyes may spot this little bird with his yellow breast, faint streaks on his sides, two white wing bars, and dark legs, for it is relatively common hearabouts.

Among warblers neither you nor I will ever, in all probability, be lucky enough to see, is the Kirtland's, a species now known to number less than 1,000. The Kirtland's winter in the Bahama Islands and migrate from there each spring to a particular pine forest near Grayling in north-central Michigan.

These, except for the Kirtland's, are the warblers most often seen during the spring in our neighborhoods, but there are as many more members of this family that migrate to other parts of this country. Because warblers are small, (up to five inches), and such busy foragers for food, identification is often difficult. The birds refuse to hold still while we note their field marks. But knowing what to look for can help, and experienced birdwatchers know where to look for each species, as well.

Search among branches several feet above your head for Black-Throated Blues, Myrtles, and Pines, but look in low shrubs for Goldenwings, Bluewings, Yellows, and Magnolias.

Much mystery still surrounds warbler migrations. Experimenters have yet to establish how a five-inch bird with a brain no larger than a garden pea can navigate thousands of miles over open oceans and forested mountain reaches to home-in on the same ancestral nesting grounds at the same time, each year; and yet, millions of them, usually flying in flocks at around 5,000 feet in the air, cover 100 miles each day to complete the trip successfully.

Many of the birds don't make it, of course; fatigue while in flight over the oceans, and accidental encounters with obstructions (since most migrating flights take place at night) take a heavy toll. Yet, enormous numbers do survive, and the warblers return to the same acreages, year after year, to build their nests, mate, and raise new generations of bug-eaters.

The appeal most birders find in watching warblers is in their brilliant colors, their relative rarity, and their busy activity.

Since warblers are, primarily, insect-eaters, we owe them enormous appreciation. Without them, the insect population would burgeon. Without them, too, our bird population would be far less colorful. Some people scoff at birdwatchers, but it's an occupation that charms many Cape Codders and fills many a happy hour. Young and old, alike, find pleasure in the pastime; during sultry summer days, a birdbath in the garden will attract all kinds of birds, but none more lovely than the warblers.