

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

SPRING WARBLERS

By Clive E. Goodwin

May is the warbler month. It is also the month of peak migration; a month that starts out with bare trees and flocks of blackbirds, and ends with gardens in bloom, trees in leaf, and nesting in full swing; while migration is winding down with only the later shorebirds and a few landbird species still passing through. But above all it is the month when the warblers return, their brilliant plumages a never ending source of delight. In this article we'll look at the species we encounter, and the timing of their migration.

We usually see the first numbers of warblers in the early days of May, and their movement continues throughout the month, with the latest species edging into the first week in June. Arrivals are far from uniform, and the mix of species changes as the month progresses.

Let's look at the migration in a little more detail, starting with arrival dates. This is one of those times when the database can be misleading, as the earliest dates in a large database represent extremely rare events. The Yellow-rumped Warbler is a good example. It is the most abundant warbler, and we have over 1800 Yellow-rumped records of almost 25000 birds in all. They are also one of the earliest warblers to appear. There are six January records – clearly birds trying to winter – one from February 18 [which may or may not have been wintering], and the next on March 20. Then there are three more in March, so in over 100 years we have only four or five reported before April.

Clearly the date of the earliest record is not very useful information if you're looking for an indication of when Yellow-rumped Warblers normally arrive. What, then, should we use? April 11 is the first day we have records from a number of years; then birds have been recorded daily commencing on April 13, and on April 19-20 we first begin to see numbers appearing. Note all these dates are fairly close together, and perhaps any would do, but below we'll use April 13, and similarly with the other species.

When we look at these arrival dates we find that fully half of our commoner warblers can first appear in April. In all, 37 species of warbler have been recorded from Northumberland. Seven of these – Yellow-throated, Kirtland's, Prairie, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, and Kentucky Warblers and Yellow-breasted Chat – are rarities, not normally to be expected in the county, although Prairie is the most regular of the group. Of the rest, 15 have at least a number of records in April.

There are three really early warblers. Most of us think of Yellow-rumped as the first. It's certainly the one most of us see first, but in Northumberland at least Pine Warbler, from April 6, is usually a little earlier. It is much less common and has relatively fussy habitat preferences, so we're less likely to see it. Palm Warbler, comes in third, with birds from April 21. By April 25 the next four appear: Nashville, Yellow and Black-throated Green Warblers and Northern Waterthrush. April ends with nine species: Chestnut-sided,

Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian and Black-and-white Warblers, Ovenbird and Common Yellowthroat, together with the much rarer Blue-winged and Cerulean.

May 5 to 7 bring the greater bulk of the remaining species: Tennessee, Cape May, Wilson's and Canada Warblers, Northern Parula and redstart, as well as rarer species such as Golden-winged and Hooded Warblers and Louisiana Waterthrush. Finally by mid-month Bay-breasted, Blackpoll and Mourning Warblers can appear. Orange-crowned Warbler is so infrequently reported in spring that it too really falls into the 'rarer' class: its arrivals start on May 12. Connecticut Warblers have been recorded from May 8, although this seems a very early date for a bird that is normally thought of as a later arrival; in any event, the species is so rarely reported that it's difficult to form a picture of its movements.

So much for the arrivals: three early, most clustered around the end of April and early May, with another three later. I must stress these are still very early dates. On April 13 we have records of 10 Yellow-rumped Warblers over four years, and records in subsequent days are similarly sparse for a week or more. In terms of seeing your first, don't expect it on April 13, but it could appear anytime.

Yellow-rumped Warblers are also probably the best species to look at to get a picture of the migration as a whole, as it is only a scarce breeder in the county, but its overall abundance means we have many records. By May 1-3 numbers of records reach around 1000 each day, and totals remain about this level until May 9-10, when we reach a peak of 2000 or more. A decline starts at this point, and by May 16-18 totals are well under 1000 records daily. May 19-21 brings totals back up to over 1000, but the peak is short-lived, and daily records then drop off sharply to under 100 on May 26, and from May 29 on there are only 2 or 3 records each day.

What the database doesn't usually show is the sex of the migrants, but observation suggests that the bulk of the early numbers are males in full breeding plumage, while the birds in the later peak are principally females.

The other species follow similar patterns with a couple of exceptions. Reports of the commoner breeding warblers, particularly Yellow, but also such species as Ovenbird and Black-and-white, stay at a relatively high level through the end of the season – with Yellow Warblers, over 200 records daily – and this tends to mask the fluctuations in the migration itself. Then only Pine and Palm Warblers have migratory periods as long as the Yellow-rumped, so the rest of the species seem to show two peaks, one about two to three weeks after the first birds arrive, and a second in the period around May 23-25, when the movements seem to be dominated by female birds.

But every year is a little different. Some years warm, clear weather allows the birds to continue their overnight journeys well north of the lakeshore, and we are left with the few that decide to break their flights. More often weather in May is a mixed bag, and we can look forward to at least a few days when warbler numbers grace our local woodlots and hedgerows. Some years may yield good numbers of the earlier migrants, while the

weather in other years may result in the later arrivals being grounded in our area. It's all part of the endlessly fascinating panorama of migration.