

ABOUT THE COVER: CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER

The Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) is a tame, perky little bird that frequently cocks its tail and droops its wings as it hops rapidly between branches and peers out at an observer from scrubby vegetation. In breeding plumage adults are unmistakable with yellow crowns, a black moustache strip through a white face, chestnut flanks, white underparts, pale yellow wing bars, and a striped yellow-green back. Females are duller in coloration and have less chestnut on their flanks. Although considered one of the "confusing fall warblers," their yellow wingbars and white eye ring serve to identify the immature birds, while the adults always retain some chestnut, even in their winter plumage.

The Chestnut-sided Warbler is one of the few bird species to benefit in a substantial way from European settlement and habitat alteration. The species was so rare in the early nineteenth century that Alexander Wilson, the "father of North American Ornithology," saw but two individuals, and Audubon reportedly observed only one. They are birds of the scrub and second-growth and have benefited from the destruction of virgin forest.

They breed across the northern Midwest and southern Canada from Saskatchewan through the Maritime provinces. In the east they follow the coast south to New Jersey, and in the Appalachians south to Georgia. There is also an isolated breeding population in the Front Range of Colorado. They are considered a fairly common breeding bird in central and western Massachusetts, but are largely absent in the southeastern part of the state. These warblers winter in Central America from Nicaragua to Panama, with the largest numbers on the Pacific slopes of Costa Rica.



Chestnut-sided Warbler
Drawing by William E. Davis, Jr.

They arrive in New England in early to mid-May and are nesting by the end of May or early June. In fall they migrate down the Appalachians and Mississippi Valley, departing New England from late August through the third week of September.

They nest in brushy thickets bordering abandoned fields and second-growth forest. Territorial song is similar for neighboring males, but varies

regionally, producing "dialects." The song's various descriptions include *very, very, pleased to meetcha*, or *see, see, see Miss Beecher*. There is also a rambling song and various *tchip* and *zeet* calls. Displays include a "fluff" display with feathers puffed out, and a "wings out" display with closed wings held away from the body. In aggressive displays, a male may fly in circles toward another male, but they lack the exaggerated moth-like flight of some warblers.

The species is monogamous, and the nest is a cup of fine plant materials lined by even finer ones. Spiderwebs are often used to help bind plant fibers together. The nest is generally in a low bush, one to three feet from the ground, and the four eggs are generally whitish, variously marked with brown. The female incubates during the nearly two weeks until hatching, but both parents feed the young and give distraction displays, with fluttering wings and fanned tail, should an intruder approach the nest. Fledging occurs in ten to twelve days.

These little warblers eat mostly insects and spiders, but occasionally take fruit and seeds. They are fairly stereotyped or inflexible in their foraging behavior, specializing in gleaning caterpillars from the underside of leaves in low to midlevel shrubs and lower branches of trees, although they occasionally hawk insects. The lack of flexibility in their foraging behavior is attributed to the fact that they forage in similar habitat on both the wintering and breeding grounds. They are solitary and territorial on their wintering grounds, but will join mixed-species foraging flocks, as the flocks pass through their territories.

Chestnut-sided Warblers are still common in their preferred habitat, but they have nonetheless experienced a steady decline since the 1940s. They are frequently parasitized by cowbirds, which often occupy edge habitat. They also may be the victim of deforestation on their wintering grounds, which in recent decades has replaced regenerating shrubby forest where they thrive with grasslands for cattle, or with sugar cane production, or other agricultural practices. We can only hope that the influences of man, which were so advantageous during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, do not bring them full circle back to the rarity of Audubon's day. W. E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE OUR COVER ARTIST

Julie Zickefoose and her husband, Bill Thompson III, recently expanded their nature preserve in Appalachian Ohio to eighty acres, which is contiguous with a neighbor's eighty protected acres of woods and meadow. Thirteen warbler species breed there, as does a thriving population of box turtles, which Julie is studying. As a contributing editor, Julie continues to write and draw for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, and she recently received an Apex Award for Excellence in Writing for "A South African Tapestry" in the *BWD* March/April 1995 issue. Julie can be reached at Indigo Hill, Route 1, Box 270, Whipple, Ohio 45788.

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