

## ABOUT THE COVER: YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

The Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) is a familiar bird during migration, the first warbler to arrive in the spring and the last to leave in the fall. They are friendly and conspicuous, occur in a wide variety of habitats, and are the only regularly occurring warblers on coastal Massachusetts Christmas Bird Counts (CBC), often appearing in large flocks. This charming warbler's name has proved ephemeral: many of today's birders learned this species as the Myrtle Warbler, but its "new" name actually reflects the resumption of one of its oldest designations. Since there are several warblers with yellow rumps, perhaps another one of the old names, "Yellow-crowned Warbler," would be more appropriate, and would match the scientific name of the species (which refers to the "coronet" that marks the crowns of adults, and some young, of this species).

The taxonomy of this warbler is as problematic as its name. What is now considered a single, continent-wide species was once split into the Myrtle Warbler of eastern North America and northern Canada and Alaska, and Audubon's Warbler (*D. auduboni*) of southwestern Canada and the western U.S., south to Guatemala. Both were considered polytypic, with Alaskan birds a subspecies (*D. c. hooveri*) of the Myrtle, and Audubon's divided into three subspecies, including two north of Mexico: Audubon's (*D. a. auduboni*) and the Black-fronted (*D. a. nigrifrons*) of the interior mountains. Then, with the lumping to form a single species, *hooveri* disappeared altogether, and the remainder of the races became subspecies of *coronata*. However, some current taxonomists think these subspecies are more appropriately considered full species — allo-species — of a superspecies complex. What an ugly mess for so beautiful a bird!

Our eastern Yellow-rumps, with their white throats, are separated from the western race ("Audubon's," about a dozen of which have been reported in Massachusetts) by the latter's yellow throat and more white on wings and tail. They all have yellow crowns, rumps, and breast patches; grayish backs; and black breast bands. However, females are duller than males and have a brownish cast and black streaks for a breast band. Juveniles are duller still and often have little or no yellow on the crown or breast. Winter plumage is duller than the crisp breeding plumage, and blacks and grays have been replaced with browns.

Yellow-rumped Warblers winter mostly in the southeastern U.S. south to Central America and the Greater Antilles, but along the east coast flocks winter in bayberry thickets as far north as Nova Scotia. They are gregarious and may roost communally. In Massachusetts they are the most numerous warbler migrants beginning in mid-April, and again from late September through November. The state's high count came on a Nantucket CBC during which over 3000 were tallied.

Yellow-rumped Warblers breed mostly in the coniferous forests of Canada, where they are the most common warbler species. In Massachusetts they breed

primarily at higher elevations in central and western parts of the state, but also locally in the east in pine forests on the coastal plain. They are seasonally monogamous and may rear two broods. The Yellow-rump's song has been described as a "silver trilling" rising or falling at the end; the song has been transliterated as *wheedle wheedle wheedler* or *ching ching wheedle wheedle weet*. They give a *tsee* or *tseet* flight song and various metallic *chep* or *chek* notes. In courtship the male fluffs his feathers, displaying his yellow crown and breast patches, raises his wings, flutters, and sings.

The males spend much of their time defending the nesting territory while the female incubates. They nest mostly on horizontal branches of spruce and other conifers as high as 50 feet, but usually 5-20 feet above the ground. The nest is a cup of twigs, shredded bark, and roots, often lined with feathers. The usual clutch is 4-5 creamy-white eggs, marbled brown or gray. Incubation, mostly by the female, lasts 12-13 days, and within two weeks the young have fledged. Yellow-rumps will give elaborate "broken wing" distraction displays near the nest, and both parents feed the young.

Yellow-rumped Warblers are foraging generalists, hawking, hovering, and gleaning a bewildering assortment of insects and spiders out of the air, from the ground, or from the branches, trunks, and foliage of trees. Males forage higher than females, a partitioning of resources that may serve to provide a food supply for the female near the nest. Although insectivorous during the breeding season, they may shift to "bugs and berries" at other seasons. In winter they often subsist largely on Bayberry, Wax Myrtle (hence the origin of the name "Myrtle" Warbler), cranberries, red cedar berries, and even Poison Ivy.

Yellow-rumped Warblers are often victims of Brown-headed Cowbird nest parasitism, and many thousands die during migration in collisions with radio towers and other structures, a problem made worse by the proliferation of towers related to cellular telephone transmission. However, these spritely birds remain our most common migrant warbler and add a cheery note to many otherwise bleak winter days.

--W.E. Davis, Jr.

### ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Louise Zemaitis, a freelance artist and naturalist, is a regular exhibitor at the "The Loft," Cape May Bird Observatory's gallery. Her illustrations have appeared in a wide variety of books, magazines, brochures, and newsletters, and on T-shirts. She also leads bird and butterfly trips for Cape May Bird Observatory. Louise lives in Cape May Point, New Jersey, with her naturalist sons, Bradley and Alec, and her husband, Michael O'Brien. Louise and her husband have recently opened their own studio, Swallowtail Studio, in Cape May Point, which can be reached at (609) 898-9578.