

## SOUTHERN WARBLERS IN MASSACHUSETTS

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Some people like tennis, some enjoy golf, while still others enjoy jogging - the list of favorite sports goes on. I indulge in my favorite sport each spring when the annual warbler migration keeps me running from dawn to dusk. Ludlow Griscom, one of our great ornithologists, once stated that "the physical energy, exceptional hearing, solid memory for details, and tremendous patience required for the pursuit of warblers, indeed puts it in the realm of sport, and, furthermore, these talents put the sport beyond the reach of the average person." Mr. Griscom also stated that five to twenty years of field experience are necessary in order to become an expert at warbler identification at every season.

We are fortunate here in eastern Massachusetts to have one of the best spots to observe the spring migration of warblers - Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. Thirty-eight different species of warblers have been recorded in this mecca for birders. The state records 41 warbler species on its all-time list, only three more than have occurred at Mt. Auburn. Each year we can expect 26 different species. We can hope to find six additional species which are southern in origin. These are the Prothonotary Warbler (Protonotaria citrea), the Worm-eating Warbler (Helminthos vermivorus), the Cerulean Warbler (Dendroica cerulea), the Yellow-throated Warbler (Dendroica dominica), the Kentucky Warbler (Oporornis formosus), and the Hooded Warbler (Wilsonia citrina).

Prothonotary Warbler: This species more often occurs in spring, after southerly storms, but is occasionally seen after fall hurricanes, as in 1954 when Hurricane Edna blew back 11 individuals, 9 of which were seen on Cape Cod. According to Griscom and Snyder (Birds of Massachusetts), a bird was suspected of having nested in Auburndale in 1890. In 1979, a male built a nest in a garage in Hawley (Berkshire County), but was unsuccessful in finding a mate. At best a straggler to New England, the Prothonotary is normally a bird of southern wooded swamps. It is most often seen along rivers or water when found in Massachusetts. The best time to look for this bird is after a southerly storm or a strong southerly wind at the time the first wave of Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers arrives. The earliest recent arrival was April 2, 1976, but you have a better chance of finding this bird after April 19. In the last 8 years there have been almost an equal number of records in April and May. One individual spent nearly a month at a feeder in Chatham from April 3-21, 1974, and still another remained in Topsfield from May 18-June 1, 1975. The other records tend to be for only a day or two. Places to look for this species could be the Ipswich, Concord, and Sudbury Rivers, or any other river in Massachusetts. I recommend a canoe trip during late April or early May. I have found this species only once while on a canoe trip, but don't let that stop you from trying.

Worm-eating Warbler: This species, though rare, nests in Massachusetts. Formerly, most records were from Berkshire County and the Connecticut Valley. It was first suspected to be breeding at Bish Bash Falls in 1923, and was regular in South Egremont from 1939 on; a nest with 4 young was found there June 19, 1949. It has been regular at Mount Tom, in Holyoke,

since 1952. In eastern Massachusetts, it has bred recently in Weston and Dover. The earliest arrival is April 16; however, most April records occur during the last week of the month. It has been recorded as a migrant throughout May, but the majority of recent records occurs during the second week of the month. The Worm-eating Warbler can occur almost anywhere and has been found at Mt. Auburn at least once during the spring migration for each of the last 15 years. This warbler spends much time feeding on the ground and can easily be missed. Its song, somewhat like that of the Chipping Sparrow, is easily overlooked. Your chances of catching up with this species are good if you are in an area where one is found. My experience has been that the birds stay fairly close to the area where they are first located.

Cerulean Warbler: This primarily western or Alleghenian species has been moving eastward and now nests along the eastern seaboard west of the Connecticut and Massachusetts lines. It has been confirmed nesting in Connecticut recently, and possibly nested in Rhode Island in 1977. The earliest occurrence, April 20, 1976, is the only record for the month of April. The best time to find this bird is May 9-25, usually on the biggest waves of spring migration. It could occur almost anywhere. This species, preferring treetops, is often hard to find when the foliage is out. It has been seen nearly every year at Mt. Auburn, usually during a big wave.

Yellow-throated Warbler: Until recently, this species could be described as the rarest of the southern strays. The Yellow-throated has a tendency to appear during April after southerly storms or strong southwest winds, again at about the time the first waves of Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers arrive. It can be found almost anywhere. However, if I may be partial, there are more records from Mt. Auburn than anywhere else since 1976. In earlier years, the sub-species Sycamore Warbler (Dendroica dominica albilora), a western form of D. dominica, was thought more apt to appear in the spring, while the full species D. dominica was reported more often during the fall. This September, 1954, hurricane blew back six Yellow-throated Warblers along Cape Cod. A very early arrival date has been April 1, though more often the reports are from April 15-May 10, and others have appeared less frequently in late May.

Kentucky Warbler: This species is likely to occur during the waves in May, although there is a record for Mt. Auburn on April 28, 1949. The first known occurrence in Massachusetts was on May 31, 1898, at Medford. Griscom and Snyder reported this species as rare, stating that far too many sight records were reported by inexperienced observers. In 1919, a male spent most of the summer, until August 21, near Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard. A report that the bird nested there was never confirmed. The Kentucky Warbler is reported more often in spring than in fall, although the 1954 hurricane did blow back birds, again on Cape Cod. The Kentucky Warbler feeds on or near the ground, but, very shy and secretive, it often hides in thick cover. Its loud distinctive song reveals its presence. The bird can show up anywhere; most recent records appear to be after May 10. During the last six years there have been 34 sightings between May 5-31. A male was found singing as late as June 6, 1974, at Buzzards Bay. At Mt. Auburn I've often seen this bird in the Dell area or the Dry Dell-Indian Ridge section where there is an uncut area of rhododendrons and forsythia. This species has also been reported regularly from Marblehead Neck and from Plum Island.



Hooded Warbler: Formerly a rare straggler from the south, this species now breeds in limited areas of Massachusetts. It has been reported every year in recent history, although it is never common. This warbler is also likely to occur after a southerly storm in April, though early May records predominate. There are fewer records in the fall, with the exception of the September, 1954, hurricane when Cape Cod was deluged with 15 sightings and 1 specimen. In Massachusetts it has bred in Bristol County and has favored wooded hillsides near water. For many years one could expect it along River Road in Westport and, in the past, several locations along Horseneck Road in South Dartmouth have been good. This entire area is the northern periphery for many southern species, like the Carolina Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Seaside Sparrow, and Hooded Warbler. At Mt. Auburn there has been at least one bird each spring. It generally makes its presence known by constant singing and displaying - more often than not in the Dell Area. When a Hooded Warbler is found, it is almost certain to spend the day in the same area. Other good locations have been Marblehead Neck and Newburyport Cemetery. Most records seem to be between April 29-May 27.

The recent proliferation of sightings of these southern species has prompted some to speculate that a general warming trend is underway in the northern hemisphere, enabling these traditionally southern birds to extend their ranges. Other observers have suggested that reductions in hard pesticide use have expanded the food supply for these species. I believe that the increased counts merely reflect the fact that many more experienced birders are looking for them now. Whatever, it is good sport. Happy warbler hunting!

#### Literature Cited

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