

The capital letters in Yellow Warbler tell us that this is a proper name, not a description. The difference is important—a Yellow Warbler may not be yellow; and a yellow warbler may not be a Yellow Warbler.

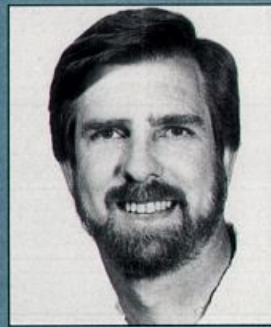
PEOPLE WHO don't know birds sometimes question our practice of capitalizing English bird names, as if it were an affectation with no practical use. "What's so special about a Common Raven?" they ask. "Why should its name be capitalized?"

In a simpler world, there might be no need. If there were few birds besides "the crow," "the raven," "the bluejay," and so on, we'd never have ambiguity about which one we meant. But with well over 9000 bird species alive, many with descriptive names, the potential for confusion is endless. Consider "common raven." The most common raven in north-central Mexico is the Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*), while the common raven in parts of Kenya is the Fan-tailed Raven (*Corvus rhipidurus*). But write "Common Raven" with capitals and you mean *Corvus corax*, of northern and western North America and northern Eurasia. Similarly, I can write about large falcons, dark-backed gulls, or diving ducks, and you'll know that I'm describing general groups—you won't have to hit the books to see if "Large Falcon" or "Dark-backed Gull" or "Diving Duck" are the names of species from other continents. Take away our practice of capitalizing, and chaos takes over.

A good example that comes to mind in spring, when the warblers

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THE PRAC TICED EYE



Yellow Warbler and Its I.D. Contenders

Photographs from VIREO

are moving north, involves our Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*). The capital letters tell us that this is a proper name, not a description. The difference is important—a Yellow Warbler may not be yellow; and a yellow warbler may not be a Yellow Warbler.

That caveat aside, this species usually *does* wear a lot of yellow. For instance, almost all warblers of the genus *Dendroica* have white tail spots, but not this one: its tail spots are yellow. (So is the rest of the bird, generally, so the spots do not contrast much.) But the overall hue of the bird can vary from rich golden yellow to dull greenish yellow to drab pallid yellowish-gray. A severe lack of actual field marks can make the Yellow Warbler subject to confusion with other plain yellowish warblers.

Birders who are experienced in eastern North America might find it odd to think that the Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) could ever be mistaken for the Yellow Warbler. At the eastern end of its range—where the Orange-crowned is not very common—it is a dull-colored bird, tending toward grayish olive. But it varies with geography. Orange-crowned Warblers nesting in the Rockies are more distinctly washed with yellow. Those nesting in the Pacific region (except for dull dark birds on California's Channel Islands and a few points on the immediate coast) are brighter



This female Yellow Warbler shows the typical wing pattern of the species. All of the major feathers of the wing show very dark centers (almost black) and very pale edges (yellow or whitish), creating an effect of short dark-and-light stripes. The other warblers that could be confused with Yellow Warbler all have very plain wings, without such contrast. Photograph / Barth Schorre / VIREO (s08/9/172).



A close-up look at an adult female Yellow Warbler. It's a plain yellow bird, with no obvious markings—and sometimes, that's the problem. Photograph / Crawford H. Greenewalt / VIREO (g02/20/022).



Yellow Warbler. This dull yellow-olive bird is dark enough on the face to reveal the complete pale eye-ring. The contrast in its wings is reduced but still apparent; notice the three black spots on the median coverts (toward the "shoulder"). This profile view shows off the characteristic short-tailed shape of this species. Photograph / Barth Schorre / VIREO (s08/5/246).



A relatively dark and brownish Yellow Warbler. The effect of an eye-ring is especially striking on this bird. Photograph / Barth Schorre / VIREO (s08/5/179).

still, often yellow-green above and bright yellow below. Encountering one of these very bright birds for the first time, an observer may be tempted to call it anything but a mere Orange-crown!

On the other side of the coin, some Yellow Warblers are extremely dull, with hardly a trace of yellow. This is especially likely with immature females, particularly from far northwestern populations. Such birds can be duller than the average Orange-crowned. Field marks are subtle. Immature female Yellows have very small yellow tail spots, hard to see in the field, but they have the same type of *wing pattern* as adults: the coverts and tertials all have dark centers and wide pale edges. The resulting effect is of a series of lengthwise dark and light stripes, with a line of dark spots near the front of the wing (on the median coverts). The strength of this pattern varies, but it is always present (except perhaps on birds in *very* worn plumage), and no other warbler

quite matches it. The wings on an Orange-crowned Warbler are very plain—they have slightly paler edgings to most feathers (like the wing feathers of most birds), but these are not wide or contrasty enough to create the effect of stripes.

Face pattern is another thing to check. “Pattern” may seem like too strong a word for the brighter and paler Yellow Warblers, on which the entire face is unmarked yellow. But on darker and duller Yellows, a pattern emerges: a pale area remains around the eye, forming an *eye-ring* that is faint on most birds, more obvious on the darkest ones. Orange-crowned Warblers also have an eye-ring, but it is broken into narrow crescents above and below the eye. Just as noticeable is the Orange-crowned’s dark eye-line, fairly conspicuous on the lores but fading out behind the eye.

Making a superficially close match to brighter Yellow Warblers is the Wilson’s Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*). Its trademark is a round black cap, but this is partly or entirely missing on many females, especially in the east. Overall shade of yellow is not much help, since it varies as much in Wilson’s as it does in the Yellow Warbler. The dullest (yellow-green) Wilson’s are in the east, the brightest are in the west. Some male Wilson’s from the Pacific Coast race are such a glowing orange-yellow that they almost suggest the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*).

The wings of Wilson’s Warblers are as plain as those of Orange-crowns, unlike the striped effect of the Yellow Warbler. With a close look at the head, it always shows a contrasting darker cap, whether or not this shows any trace of black. But observers who know both birds will rarely need to look for such detail, because *shape* is an easier clue: Wilson’s is relatively long-tailed, Yellow is notably short-tailed. Wilson’s often holds its tail up above horizon-



Orange-crowned Warbler. Photographed in California, this bird looks typical of *V. c. lutescens*, the brightest and yellowest race, which breeds in the Pacific coast regions as far north as southeastern Alaska. Photograph / Peter LaTourrette / VIREO (109/3/001).



Most Orange-crowned Warblers in the central and eastern sections of the continent are dull-colored birds. They differ from dull Yellow Warblers in their plainer wings, eye-ring broken into two narrow arcs, and more-or-less distinct dark line through the eye. Photograph / Dale and Marian Zimmerman / VIREO (z01/7/084).



The trademark black cap of Wilson’s Warbler is often faint, missing, or just hard to see, leaving an impression of a plain yellowish warbler. Photograph / Rick Bowers.



Some Wilson's Warblers can rival the brightest Yellow Warblers both in color and in lack of distinct field marks. Rather than look for markings on this bird, the practiced observer will first note its relatively long tail—often held slightly raised, as it is here—and then move on to things like the plain wings and the expression of the face. Photograph / Barth Schorre / VIREO (s08/14/066).



Hooded Warbler, probably a first-winter female, photographed on wintering range in Colombia. Even without seeing white in the tail, we might sense that this bird is a little too heavy-bodied and big-headed for Wilson's Warbler, too plain-winged for Yellow Warbler...and it has just a trace of the outline of the male's black "hood." Wilson's and Hooded warblers often have fairly bright pink legs, unlike the dull grayish-pink ones of Yellow Warbler. Photograph / John Dunning / VIREO (d01/27/280).



These three Wilson's Warblers, photographed at an Arizona banding station in September, show some of the variation in the dark cap in this species. Photograph / Rick Bowers.

tal, and flips it about while foraging. Any tail motion by a Yellow Warbler is minor and far less conspicuous, because the tail is so short. This difference can be especially useful in late summer and early fall, because Yellow and Wilson's are both among the earliest fall migrants, and their numbers in passage may peak at about the same time.

Related to Wilson's, and similar to it in many ways, is the Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*). The black hood of males (and of many females) is distinctive; but most females under one year of age lack it entirely—they look like plain yellow-green warblers. Confusion with Yellow or Wilson's warblers is unlikely, however, because the Hooded has big white patches in the tail, which it flashes conspicuously in the dark undergrowth where it spends most of its time.

Because the Hooded is so often a bird of dense thickets, we often notice it first by its callnote, a hard metallic *chik* or *tink*. Callnotes, in fact, are among the best quick distinctions for plain yellowish war-

blers. The bright musical *chip* of the Yellow Warbler, the thin *tsit* of the Orange-crowned Warbler, the dry flat *djep* of the Wilson's Warbler—these are among the most recognizable of warbler calls. Sometimes all the observer needs for a quick identification is a callnote, a flash of yellow, a hint of shape and behavior. But if the bird cooperates, it's always worth taking a longer look, to appreciate the subtle field marks of these "plain" yellow warblers. ■

VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientific collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds well over 100,000 images, representing about half of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J. P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May-June 1984.
