



On the left is a male yellow-rumped warbler in his finest breeding plumage. Note the yellow on the rump, sides and crown. The breeding male also has a striking dark mask and white wingbars. The underside is mostly white with dark streaks. Female and juvenile yellow-rumps (right) have similar features but are more subdued in plumage.

So Many Warblers, So Little Time

By Tammy Mercer, Garden Naturalist

The colorful wood warblers are the most exciting harbingers of spring for many birders, including me. They arrive sporting their brightest breeding plumages of yellow, orange, olive green, rich browns and other colors. But for beginning and more experienced birders alike, they can be a challenge to see and identify. These tiny birds are in constant motion as they search for insects, often high in the trees. They do not stay here for long. Most of them are just passing through, stopping to refuel as they head farther north to breed.

Over the years, I have seen at least 24 species of warblers in and around the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, and other birders could add a few more to that list. With so many species that we see only during spring and fall migration, it's easy to feel a bit overwhelmed. But the thrill of getting a look at these beautiful birds, however brief, is well worth the effort.

Warblers are smaller than most sparrows, with thin, pointy bills for catching insects. They are almost always on the move. Most warblers forage in the trees for tiny insects and spiders on the leaves, branches and other parts of trees. Some prefer to hunt high in the trees; others may be found in lower branches and shrubs. A few even hunt for food on the ground, while others prefer open, scrubby areas or wetlands.

Foraging behaviors can help you distinguish some of the species. Many fly from branch to branch, but some hover about the tips of branches to find their prey, and others snatch flying insects from the air. Some move about the trunks and limbs of trees, probing the bark for insects.

The best way to start learning to identify warblers is to take one species at a time. One of the first and most abundant warblers to appear each spring is the yellow-rumped warbler. Yellow-rumps tend to forage lower in the trees, making it easier to find them. They also hunt for insects in open areas and wetlands and will fly up to catch insects in the air.

The most important field marks of the yellow-rumped warbler are the yellow rump, which is a patch of color on their back, just above

the tail; and yellow patches on their sides, just in front of their wings (see photos at right). Males also have a spot of yellow on the top of the head, but this is not always visible. Sometimes you get your best look from below. The yellow-rump is mostly white from below. It has a white throat and a white belly streaked with black on the breast and sides. Yellow-rumps also have large white spots on their tails.

You may want to grab your field guide or check one out from the library. Get to know the parts of a bird from a drawing, usually found in the front of the book. Then look for the section on warblers for other views of the yellow-rumped warbler. Once you get to know the yellow rump, you can start to compare it to other species.

Whether you know the warblers' names or not, you can enjoy their beautiful variety of colors and behaviors while they are here. They are well worth making the effort to find. Spring migration usually lasts from late March to early June, with different species arriving at different times.

Every Saturday morning from April through October, the Early Birders walk the Garden and surrounding Wirth Park in search of birds. We can help you find warblers and learn to identify them. If the snow has melted, we will meet in the upper parking lot on Saturday, April 4 at 9:30 a.m. For complete monthly schedules, check our website at www.minneapolisparcs.org, then use the dropdown menu on the right to find Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden.



The Cape May warbler (above) and the blackburnian warbler (below) pass through in small numbers on their way to nesting grounds in the boreal forest to the north.

Once you are familiar with the yellow-rumped warbler, you can compare it to other warblers. The magnolia warbler (top) also has a yellow rump and the breeding male has the striking dark mask and white wing bars. But unlike the yellow-rump, the magnolia warbler has a bright yellow underside with dark streaks. Unlike most warblers that are just passing through, the yellow warbler (middle) and the American Redstart (bottom) often nest in the Twin Cities area, usually near wetlands.