

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The breeding plumage of this adult male yellow-rumped warbler is striking. The auricular, or cheek mask is black where the female's is brown or gray. Photo by: Andy Reago and Chrissy McClarren, Flickr.

Yellow-rumped warbler - "Butter butts"

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

One of the most commonly-seen small song birds in the late fall through early spring in our forests is the yellow-rumped warbler. It is an absolutely lovely bird, but because of its abundance it is sometimes not given as much attention as it deserves. It's petite, although it is a little larger when compared to other warblers, yellow rumps are perching birds that often sit in the open, making them easier to spot than more flighty species.

You often find them lower in the foliage than a number of other warbler species and sometimes they will park in the outer parts of the canopy. In winter the deciduous trees are leafless making spotting them easier as well. Birders complain of “warbler-neck” because of straining to look upwards at high-perching species. Sometimes when you’re hoping for diversity a flock of the same bird might seem less than impressive, but I suggest, “Just go with it, don’t be that ‘grass is greener’ person!”



The yellow cap is visible during breeding season on this male bird. Photo by Kelly Colgan Azar, Flickr.

In terms of warbler-neck, a famous bird watcher in South America taught me a little trick. Once you spot a bird, keep your eyes raised and lower your chin, continuing to look through your

binoculars. This significantly reduces the strain!

Yellow-rumped warblers are considered a rare New Jersey breeder, nesting in the far northwest of the State in very low numbers. They prefer the northeastern United States, although the vast majority, 63%, fly to Canada and up into Alaska. Their ideal breeding habitat is the conifer boreal forest or "taiga."

The boreal ecozone actually spans eight countries: the United States, Canada, China, Finland, Japan, Norway, and Russia. "Boreal" is defined by its high-latitude environment, with 6-8 months of freezing temperatures each year, a short growing season, and trees that must reach a minimum of 16 feet tall. Yellow-rumped warblers breed in this ecosystem in the late spring and summer.

As you may recall, migration is driven by food and nesting resources. The warbler moves based on weather and food availability. The invertebrate populations in the taiga are a draw for nesting warblers; spiders, caterpillars, moths, mosquitoes, treehoppers, beetles, mayflies, and the like are all important fare.

When they are here in their southern winter locale they have uniquely developed an ability to eat waxy berries, especially bayberry and wax myrtle. In fact they are the only warbler with this gastrointestinal capacity. This allows them to winter farther north than any other warbler species, at times as far north as Nova Scotia. Other creatures do however compete for bayberries and wax myrtle. Naturalist Patricia Sutton lists 25 different species for each type, that forage on these shrubs.

They also eat the cones of eastern red cedar trees (these are not berries as commonly believed). Many birds compete for this resource: robins, mockingbirds, cedar waxwings, juncos, yellow-bellied sapsucker, turkeys, flickers, and others (Patricia Sutton lists 32 species). They will also eat seeds. Their selected food sources allow us observe them here in Southern New Jersey. At feeders people use fruit and suet to attract them.



The winter plumage of the yellow-rumped warbler has more brown and gray than the breeding plumage. This bird is using the sunny side of a cedar for warmth. It is also holding its feathers further from its body - "fluffed-up," to trap and warm air for insulation against the cold. Photo by author.

Their breeding plumage is flashier than their regular wear, but their feathers aren't too shabby in winter either. In the off-season most folks look for the yellow vent that gives them the nickname with birders of "butter butts." There is a also bit of yellow hidden in part by the wing coverts on the sides of the chest. If you have good optics you will want to take note of a rim of white under and over the eye, giving it, dare I say, an appearance of wearing peepers.

In the spring and summer their breeding plumage, is fancier than

winter and a striking combination of whites and blacks, with yellow on the sides and rump and the addition of a yellow spot on the crown. The male has a black mask that contrasts with the white throat. And the white line under the eye shows up well against the black of the mask and cheek. The female's cheek or auriculars tend to be brown or gray where the male's black, and so the contrasts are not as strong.



This yellow-rumped warbler was finding a few late season insects at Heislerville Wildlife Management Area. Photo by Author.

When these birds migrate north and arrive in their breeding grounds they will select a conifer to make a cup-shaped nest. The female will lay 4-5 eggs that will be incubated for a dozen days by both parents. After 10-12 days

the young will fledge. The young and adults will have an insectivorous diet during the breeding season.

On a chilly day when they raise their feathers to trap and warm air to insulate themselves against the harsh winter they are especially endearing, like little fluff balls. So bundle up yourself and enjoy a few butter butts while they visit us this winter!