

Spanning the Gap

Catch a Wave



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Spanning the Gap
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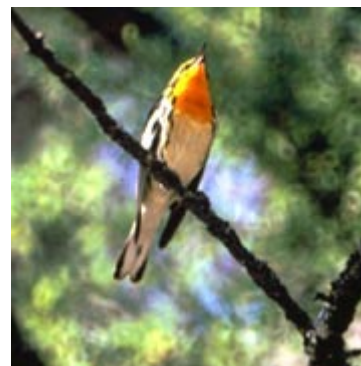
By Park Ranger Brian Hardiman

Opportunities abound this spring to catch some waves in the recreation area. Waves of the feathered sort, that is. Songbirds called warblers migrate through our area in flights that are sometimes described as waves. These warbler waves sweep across an area, the birds moving about the trees actively feeding and flitting about before leaving the observer in their wake. Described by birding guru Roger Tory Peterson as "the butterflies of the bird world" for their brightly colored plumage, warblers may be the most beautiful of all North American birds.

Over 30 species of warblers can be expected in the recreation area as either a spring migrant or breeder. Late April into the first three weeks of May is the best time to witness our region's migration of these tiny, prismatic bundles of energy.

Seeing and identifying warblers can be a lesson in humility and frustration for potential watchers. Getting a good enough look to identify one falls somewhere between difficult to impossible. It's a task that will have you questioning your sanity as you hopelessly try to focus on one of the diminutive, feathery puffs of perpetual motion as it dances high in the tree canopy.

Some nesting warblers of the recreation area include the yellow warbler, common yellowthroat, American redstart, hooded warbler, black-throated



Blackburnian warbler.
(*Dendroica fusca*)



Black-throated green warbler
(*Dendroica virens*) and nest.

(*Photographs from Draft
Environmental Assessment
for Release of ... a Biological
Control Agent for Hemlock
Woolly Adelgid, Delaware*

green warbler, black and white warbler, Louisiana water thrush, ovenbird, prairie warbler, chestnut-sided warbler and blue-winged warbler. The descriptive names alone are enough to whet anyone's appetite for a look at these flying jewels. The brilliant colors more than make up for their uninspired songs of buzzy trills and lisps.

Most warblers spend the winter in Central and South America before migrating north to nest. Migrating mainly at night, this arduous journey is one of the marvels of nature. For some, migration takes them across the Gulf of Mexico, a 500-mile trip accomplished during the course of a single night. Quite a feat for a package of feathers weighing in under half an ounce.

Many warblers never reach their nesting grounds. Natural and constructed dangers (storms, predators, radio towers, tall buildings) encountered during migration can result in high mortality.

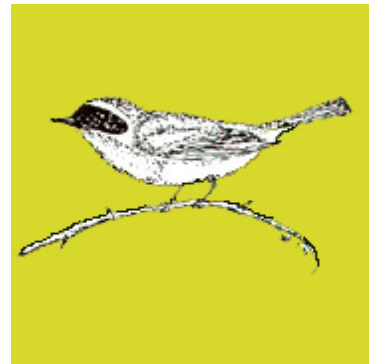
Overall, habitat loss is cited to be the most critical factor in the current decline of warblers and other songbirds. Warbler waves, as a result, are not of the size or frequency that they were in the past. Old-time naturalists lament the passing of these great waves.

But it's not too late to catch a wave. Pack the binoculars, field guide, and a hefty dose of determination, and search high and low the recreation area's woodlands and thickets for these elusive warblers. The challenge is great, the reward even greater. After identifying your very first warbler, those feelings of self-satisfaction will make the sore neck disappear quicker than a black-throated green into the treetops.

*Water Gap National
Recreation Area, May 2000)*



Black-throated green warbler.
(NPS sketch)



Common yellow-throat.
(NPS sketch)