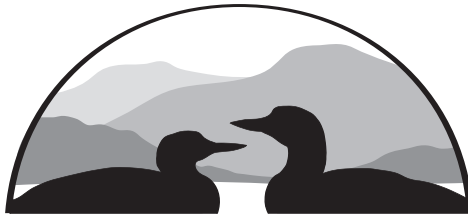


New Hampshire Bird Records



Winter 2012-13

Vol. 31, No. 4



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IN MEMORY OF
Donald R. Niswander

*“A bad day fishing is better than a
good day at work.”*



This issue of *New Hampshire Bird Records* with its color cover is sponsored by the Niswander family in memory of Donald R. Niswander, son, husband, dad, grandpa, brother, uncle and cousin.

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Spotlight on “Winter” Warblers

by Lauren A. Kras and Benjamin Griffith



Cape May Warbler that overwintered at Odiorne Point State Park in Rye during the winter of 2011-12. Photographed by Christine Sheridan, 1/28/12.

Background

The New World warblers or wood-warblers are a group of small passerine birds in the family *Parulidae* that are restricted to the Western Hemisphere. Many species are very colorful, but appearance varies widely between species, and several species are brown in all plumages. Size ranges widely between species; the smallest species weighs less than eight grams, or slightly more than a quarter, and the largest species can weigh as much as 25 grams. Most species are neotropical migrants, which means that they breed in the United States and Canada and winter in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Indeed, warblers are the highlight of the warmer months for many New Hampshire birders. Although warblers are often associated with migration and the breeding season, here we focus on those species which have occurred in the winter in New Hampshire and discuss the circumstances which surround these winter sightings.

Although some individual warblers have been documented throughout the winter, many are seen for shorter periods of time. For birds which were only seen for a short period of time, it is impossible to tell if they were extremely late migrants, wintering birds which went undetected for much of the winter, or wintering birds that died during their stay. It is therefore necessary to come up with a somewhat arbitrary definition for what constitutes a “winter warbler.” For the purposes of this article, any bird that is reported during the winter season (December - February) will be treated as wintering. Except where specifically mentioned, “Myrtle” Yellow-rumped Warbler will not be treated as a “wintering warbler” as it is dramatically more common than any of the other species and sightings of it are far less likely to be reported than rarer species. In particular, eBird has dramatically increased the number of Yellow-rumped Warblers being reported annually, making numbers in recent years less comparable to historical records than for other species.

Table 1. Records of warbler species in New Hampshire during the winter (December through February), 1951-2012 (Feb.).

Species	Number of Records	Species	Number of Records
“Audubon’s” Warbler	3	Palm Warbler	15
Black-and-white Warbler	2	Pine Warbler	20
Black-throated Blue Warbler	3	Townsend’s Warbler	1
Cape May Warbler	3	Yellow Warbler	1
Common Yellowthroat	27	Yellow-breasted Chat	12
Nashville Warbler	1	Yellow-throated Warbler	3
Northern Waterthrush	1	Hooded Warbler	1
Orange-crowned Warbler	10	Northern Parula	1
Ovenbird	7	Black-throated Green Warbler	1
Tennessee Warbler	1	Total Records	113

Occurrence in New Hampshire

Only one species of warbler is expected in New Hampshire in winter (Yellow-rumped Warbler), however, a total of 18 species have occurred during the winter months and eight of these species (including Yellow-rumped Warbler) have occurred five or more times during the season. In general, the species that winter furthest north are the species which are most regular. A disproportionate number of records have come from the Seacoast, with most of the remaining records coming from the southern part of the state. Species will be discussed in decreasing frequency of occurrence.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*)

Yellow-rumped Warbler is by far the most regular species of warbler during winter. “Myrtle” Warbler (*S. c. coronata*), the subspecies which breeds in New Hampshire, occurs commonly along the coast well into December and becomes progressively less common as the winter progresses. Usually, at least a few survive into January, and many years they survive later into the winter. “Myrtle” Warblers are less common inland during the winter, but still occur into late December in the southern tier of towns, and along the Maine border. It should come as no surprise that they have occurred regularly further north. Indeed, it has been recorded on the Pittsburg Christmas Bird Count, in the very northern tip of the state!

The western form of Yellow-rumped Warbler, “Audubon’s” Warbler (*S. c. auduboni*) is a rare visitor to New Hampshire. There are only four records for New Hampshire, but three of these have occurred during the winter. The first winter record was at Odiorne Point State Park in Rye in 2001 and it continued there at least through the Coastal Christmas Bird Count. The subspecies made a repeat performance at Odiorne in 2005 and this time was recorded throughout the winter. In January 2009, an “Audubon’s” Warbler appeared at a feeder in Newmarket, where it spent most of the month.



Figure 1. Number of records of winter (December through February) warblers in each county of New Hampshire, 1951-2012 (Feb.).

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*)

Common Yellowthroats normally winter along the coast north to North Carolina and are the second most common wintering warbler in New Hampshire, with 27 records since 1954. They prefer wetlands with emergent vegetation and are generally found in this habitat when they winter in New Hampshire. Records are spread temporally fairly evenly through December, with only five records occurring in January. It could be that many of these are exceptionally late migrants, although if this were the case, there would probably be more of a bias towards the first few days in December. It may be that they are birds that try to “hold out” through the New Hampshire winter, but are rewarded with an unpleasant surprise when winter settles in and the water in their marsh freezes, along with the associated insects.

Pine Warbler (*Setophaga pinus*)

Pine Warbler has a similar winter range in the eastern United States to Common Yellowthroat, but is slightly less common in winter in New Hampshire, with 20 records. It uses a very different strategy from the yellowthroat when it occurs in winter, with many birds occurring in residential areas at feeders. As a result, Pine Warbler is one of the few species that is as likely to occur inland as they are to occur coastally. Only six of the records come from coastal towns, and three of these could be late migrants. Most of the records have still been in the southern part of the state where the winter is milder.

Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*)

Palm Warbler is yet another species which winters as far north as North Carolina, and has occurred 15 times during the winter season. In stark contrast to Pine Warbler, Palm Warbler is very predictable as to where it occurs during winter; twelve of the records have been on the immediate coast. The remaining three records can hardly be called “inland,” as two were on the shore of Great Bay and the remaining record was from the Exeter Wastewater Treatment Plant; along a tidal creek, just eight miles from the coast and five miles from Great Bay.

As with the Yellow-rumped Warbler, Palm Warbler has two field identifiable forms: birds breeding from Quebec and New York eastward are yellow underneath (“Yellow” Palm Warbler, *S. p. hypochrysea*); and birds breeding from Alberta to extreme western Quebec are brown underneath (“Western” Palm Warbler, *S. p. palmarum*). Counter intuitively, the “Western” Palm Warbler is the more common migrant during fall on the Atlantic coast. This holds true through the winter, and all birds identified to subspecies in the winter have been of the “Western” subspecies.

Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*)

The Yellow-breasted Chat is an enigmatic bird, so enigmatic that scientists have not yet determined that it is indeed a warbler, but as it’s currently classified as such, it is included in this article. Its occurrence in New Hampshire is equally mysterious. The chat is a southern species which is extremely rare in spring and summer, but is expected in small numbers along the coast in fall, well into November, and even occurs in winter with some regularity! There are 12 records from the winter season, nine of which have occurred along the coast or Great Bay. As with many of the other wintering warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats are frequently found coming to feeders.

There is a dearth of records between 1969 and 1998, but since then Yellow-breasted Chats have occurred on average every other year in winter.

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Oreothlypis celata*)

The Orange-crowned Warbler is one of New Hampshire's latest migrating warblers, with normal migration occurring through mid-November, however, they are never common in the state. They winter as far north as North Carolina and there are 10 winter records. Two of these records (both on December 5, 2009) likely represented a late push of migrants, but most, if not all, of the remaining eight records appear to have been overwintering birds. As with the Pine Warbler, many of the winter reports of Orange-crowned Warbler have been of birds attending feeders, and Orange-crowned Warblers are equally likely to winter inland as on the coast.

Ovenbird (*Seiurus auricapillus*)

The Ovenbird does not normally winter north of Florida, so its occasional occurrence in winter is somewhat surprising. Although there are only seven winter records of this highly terrestrial warbler, all of them have been since 1991, and six have been since 1997. The cause of the sudden increase in records is a bit of a mystery. There's no evidence that the increase in records is correlated with an increase in population. With the exception of a bird at Odiorne Point State Park, all of the winter records have pertained to birds in residential neighborhoods. Most of the Ovenbirds were observed visiting bird feeders. Perhaps the observed increase is related to an increase in the popularity of feeding birds and an increase in reporting by backyard bird watchers.

Rare Species with 2-4 records

Four more species have occurred multiple times in winter: Cape May Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Black-and-white Warbler. Black-and-white Warbler has a similar winter distribution to Ovenbird, but there are only two winter records. Perhaps it is less inclined to visit feeders making it either less likely to survive, or simply less likely to be detected. Black-throated Blue Warbler winters farther south than most of the previously mentioned species, but has been found in residential neighborhoods three times, probably using bird feeders to survive. Cape May Warbler is uncommon in New Hampshire, isn't a particularly late migrant, and winters almost entirely in the Caribbean. Two of the three records were in early December, and the birds likely did not make it through the winter. The third record is of a bird at Odiorne Point State Park during the winter of 2011-12 that first appeared in November, survived December undetected, and was rediscovered in January. The bird was reported almost daily through mid-March. Lastly, Yellow-throated Warbler has occurred three times in New Hampshire during winter, each time coming to bird feeders. As a primarily southeastern species and a rarity in New Hampshire at any time of year, its repeat appearances in winter may come as a surprise. Yellow-throated Warblers are hardy, however, and often seem to wander far to the north and west in winter, with records as far afield as Washington, Idaho, and Newfoundland.

Rare Species with one record

Seven more species have occurred in winter one time each: Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Tennessee Warbler and Northern Waterthrush. Given the rarity

of these species in winter, it's hard to find too many patterns. All of these birds aside from the Northern Waterthrush, which was seen through January, occurred in December, and it looks as if few if any succeeded in surviving the winter. Townsend's Warbler deserves a special note, as it is a western species which winters as far north as British Columbia. In this case, the single record is more likely a reflection of the rarity of the species in New Hampshire (approximately five records in total), than the improbability of its occurrence in the state in winter.



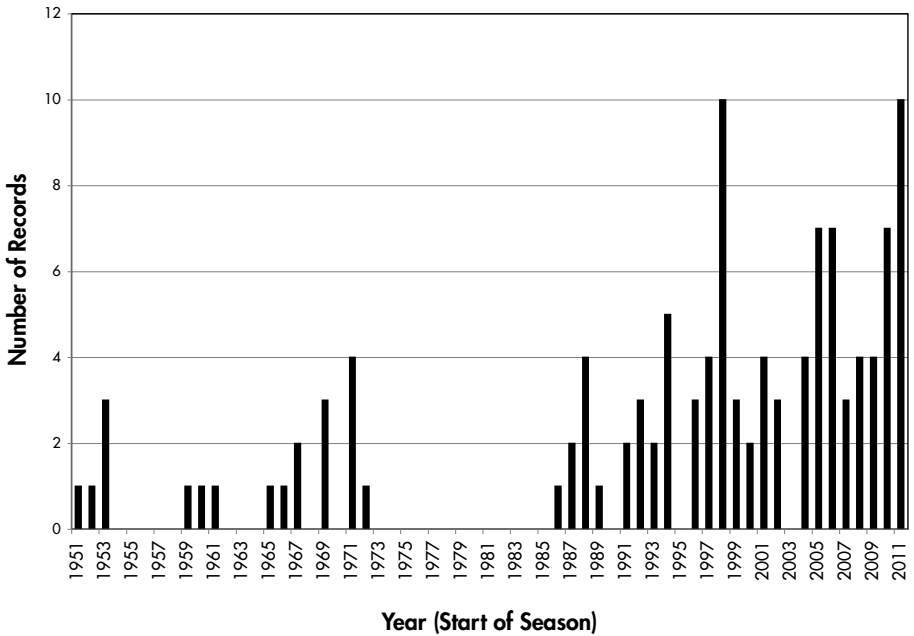
Black-throated Green Warbler by Steve Mirick, 12/22/11, Great Bay Rd., Greenland, NH.

Comments

The winter of 2011-2012 was extremely mild, with above average temperatures and below average snowfall. It therefore follows that there were a large number of winter warblers, with more than 10 reports. This exceeds the previous winter high of 10 set during the winter of 1998-1999. Also interesting is the presence of three of the rarer species during the winter. With the exception of 2005-2006 (which also had three winter records) no other winter has had more than one of the rare species. Two of these rare species, Northern Parula and Black-throated Green Warbler, were at the same site on consecutive days, both of which were the first recorded winter occurrences for the species in New Hampshire. The third, a Cape May Warbler, survived throughout the winter and represented the first winter record after December.

Since 1986, warblers have been reported in all but three winters. In sharp contrast, there are zero records of winter warblers (aside from Yellow-rumped) between 1971 and 1986. Prior to 1971, warblers were reported in approximately half of the winters. There doesn't seem to be any obvious reason for the gap in records. Overall, there is an increasing trend in the number of records, but the cause is not entirely clear. Climate change could be playing a role here by making New Hampshire winters more hospitable for birds, which previously would have wintered farther south, or by causing severe weather events, which would prevent birds from migrating. Birding and bird feeding, however, have become more popular in the past 50 years and technology has improved optics, communication, and clothing. Any of these could result in changes in detection without a change in distribution. Additionally, bird feeders can allow birds which would otherwise be unable to survive the winter to find an easy source of food. We may never know what caused the long term fluctuations in winter warbler populations, but future observations can help us better understand this obscure aspect of our winter bird communities.

Figure 2. Number of records of winter (December through February) warblers by year in New Hampshire, 1951-1966.



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The following data sources were searched for records of this species. The data for all figures represent the number of records; duplicates are not included. Not all records presented here have been reviewed by the New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee.

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Abbreviations Used

BBC	Brookline Bird Club	R.	River
BBS	Breeding Bird Survey	Rd.	Road
CA	Conservation Area	Rt.	Route
CC	Country Club	SF	State Forest
CFT	NH Audubon Chapter Field Trip	SP	State Park
FT	Field Trip	SPNHF	Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Concord
IBA	Important Bird Area	T&M	Thompson & Meserves (Purchase)
L.	Lake	TNC	The Nature Conservancy
LPC	Loon Preservation Committee	WMA	Wildlife Management Area
NA	Natural Area	WMNF	White Mountain National Forest
NHA	New Hampshire Audubon	WS	NHA Wildlife Sanctuary
NHBR	New Hampshire Bird Records	~	approximately
NHRBC	NH Rare Birds Committee	WTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant
NWR	National Wildlife Refuge		
PO	Post Office		

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