

Cape May Warbler *Setophaga tigrina*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

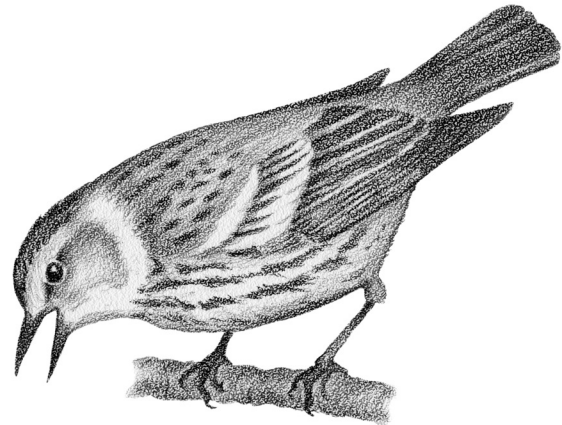
Habitat: Forest canopy

The Cape May Warbler is a regular and well-known migrant in both spring and fall throughout the Carolina Piedmont. The breeding male has a characteristic chestnut ear patch and is yellow with “chains of black dashes” below, looking like stripes, hence its species name. This bird also has a prominent white wing patch. Many birders have decried the choice of this bird’s common name as it is not related to Cape May in any way other than that it was the location where the first specimen was collected. Some have suggested the name “Bay-eared Warbler” would be a more logical and descriptive choice for this beautiful bird.

During spring migration, these birds forage high up in the crowns of trees searching for insects. In the fall, they supplement their diet of insects by eating grapes, grape juice, and even tree sap. In the early twentieth century, there were many accounts of Cape May Warblers damaging commercial and residential grape crops. C.R. Harding shared one account of Cape May Warblers moving through Davidson on September 11, 1933. According to Harding, these birds were “attacking grapes and causing serious injury.”

One fall migration, Cape May Warblers were observed feasting “with a single-minded obsession” on an outbreak of aphids in a sugar maple tree in the city of Fayetteville. The unusually large outbreak of aphids was ascribed to a prolonged period of very dry weather. Up to 25 or 30 Cape May Warblers were observed feeding at one time. Each “fed constantly, shifting from one area to another for half an hour or more at a time, but never perching still to rest or preen.”

Spring migrants were “noted in 1922, 1923, 1924” in Salisbury and were reported in large numbers on May 3, 1924. Frank Brown reported one in Davidson on May 7, 1929. On April 21, 1930, William McIlwaine reported his “positive identification” of a male Cape May Warbler singing in Charlotte. Cape May Warblers arrived in Charlotte by 10 April in the spring of 1943. They were noted in fall migration on 25 September that year. John Trott reported this species migrating through New London in “very large numbers,” between 22 April and 3 May in 1944. A single Cape May Warbler was found dead at the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte airport on the night of September 25, 1955. Joe Norwood reported two Cape May Warblers in migration on October 8, 1961, in Charlotte.



Cape May Warblers have been counted on almost every Spring Bird Count conducted in this region. Our early and late dates for spring migration for this species are: 28 March and 19 May. Our early and late dates for fall migration are 6 September and 1 November. Our peak count is a one-day tally of 46 birds on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count in 1963.

The March sighting is particularly early as this species generally arrives after the first week of April, so the report is provided here: Dave Lovett and four other birders visited Landsford Canal State Park on March 28, 2002, in search of early spring migrants. Despite the presence of “cold north winds,” the group was soon rewarded



Cape May Warbler in a man-made water feature in Charlotte's Chantilly neighborhood. (Jim Guyton)

with several species of warblers. Lovett reported: “An unmistakable CAPE MAY in full breeding plumage was seen by John Buckman and myself. An hour later, the same bird was found by Ben Berry. This is really early for this bird.”

We have two reports of Cape May Warblers in this region during the winter months. Paul Hart observed a male at Crowders Mountain State Park on Christmas Day in 1985. An adult male was photographed near the Town of Davidson on December 20, 2015.

Scientists warn that the population of the Cape May Warbler is rapidly declining throughout its North American breeding range.