

Cerulean Warbler *Setophaga cerulean*



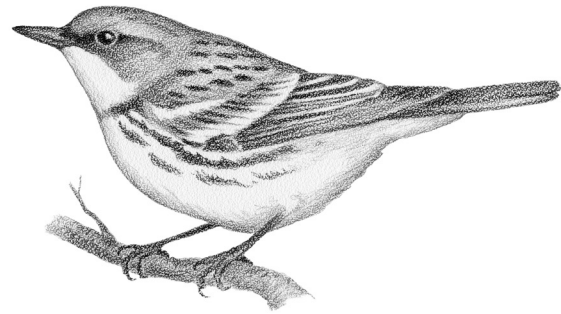
Folk Name: (none)
Status: Migrant
Abundance: Rare
Habitat: Forest canopy

The Cerulean Warbler is a neotropical migrant that is in serious trouble. It only breeds in eastern North America and it winters in the Andes mountains of South America. Once “among the most abundant breeding warblers in the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys,” the continental population of this sky-blue warbler declined drastically throughout the 1900s. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a steep and steady population decline. Habitat loss and habitat degradation on both its breeding and wintering grounds are believed to be the main causes of the decline.

In 2006, a petition by scientists to have this warbler officially listed as “Threatened” in the United States, failed. This decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service not to list this species has been very controversial. Cerulean Warbler is currently listed as a Federal Species of Concern. Since 2007, a Technical Group comprised of public and private organizations has been working to address the rapid population decline of this warbler.

In the second edition of *Birds of North Carolina*, published in 1942, the authors only knew of three accounts of nests of this species for the entire state. One of these was reported in Iredell County although insufficient details were provided:

Wayne saw an adult feeding young at Morganton on May 28, 1909. At Greensboro, in the summer of 1929, E.E. and F.R. Brown watched an adult feeding young under a tree in which was a nest believed to



be of this species. M.E. Stimson found [a] nest with young “apparently of this species” at Statesville in the summer of 1930.

In 1980, the authors of *Birds of the Carolinas* wrote: “Although the species definitely breeds in North Carolina, its range and nesting habits are not well known. ...The species formerly nested at Morganton, Statesville, and Greensboro.”

Today, its breeding status in North Carolina is a little better understood. It is known as a breeder in a handful of counties along the Blue Ridge escarpment and also in the eastern part of the state, along a protected stretch of the Roanoke River. In the 1990s, it was suspected of breeding near Caesars Head in South Carolina, but a nest was not confirmed.

Almost all records of the Cerulean Warbler in the Central Carolinas are from spring migration. Quiet, fall-plumaged birds are more difficult to pick out and identify than sky-blue males singing in the tops of trees. Our best records come from the collecting efforts of Leverett Loomis. He reported this warbler as a regular migrant, “though rather rare,” in Chester in both the spring (13–30 April) and fall (8 August–22 October). Loomis wrote that he believed this species’ early arrival as a fall migrant indicated that it was probably a breeder in the nearby mountains. His hypothesis was later proven to be correct.

We have just over a dozen reports of Cerulean Warbler from the twentieth century. In August 1930, Maurice Stimson reported an adult female present in Statesville. Grace Anderson reported seeing a pair of Cerulean Warblers in Statesville on April 23, 1942, another pair on 7 May, and just a male on 15 May of that year. John Trott reported two males heading south through Stanly County in late July 1945. Elizabeth Clarkson designated it as a “rare transient” for Charlotte and shared these



Cerulean Warbler at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on April 17, 2015. (jeff Lemons)

dates: April 30 and May 1, 1946; April 24 to 30, 1961; May 5, 1962. H. Lee Jones reported an astounding eight Cerulean Warblers, “an unusually large number,” in spring migration in Charlotte on April 19–20, 1963. William Shepherd reported one in Spartanburg on May 3, 1966. Flo Cobey sighted one in Charlotte on April 29, 1967.

David Wright reported two males in Fort Mill on August 8, 1983. Charlotte Spring Bird Count participants found two Cerulean Warblers on May 5, 1984, which turned out to be a “significant” day for warblers with a total of 28 species sighted. Heathy Walker reported three “singing males” migrating through Charlotte on

April 28, 1989. Taylor Piephoff found one in the city on May 1, 1989, and two on August 18, 1991. The author reported a fall migrant at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on September 30, 1997.

We have over two dozen reports of spring migrants in the twenty-first century. Migrants have been seen from 28 March through 10 May. Fall birds have been reported from 31 July through 22 October.

The Cerulean Warbler is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action. It is currently listed as a species of Special Concern in North Carolina.