

## Mourning Warbler *Geothlypis philadelphia*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Migrant

**Abundance:** Very Rare to Rare

**Habitat:** Thickets along woodland edges

The Mourning Warbler looks similar to the Connecticut Warbler, but genetic evidence shows it is more closely related to the Kentucky Warbler and Common Yellowthroat. It is one of the rarest warblers ever discovered migrating through the Central Carolinas and is truly a rare find anywhere in either state.

Charlotte's William McIlwaine is credited with the first definitely dated record of a Mourning Warbler ever reported in North Carolina. He discovered the bird on July 31, 1931, while out of town for a month studying at the Presbyterian conference center at Montreat.

This is McIlwaine's published account:

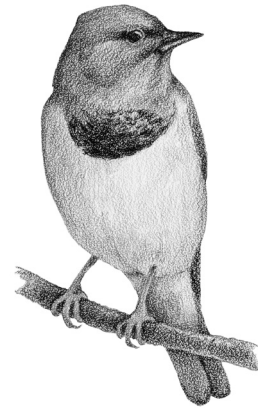
A warbler seen distinctly at close range for a few seconds. It sat low in a tree, before dropping down into the thick underbrush. I studied it carefully through 8x30 glasses. My notes say—"Sooty head and throat, no orbital ring, yellow underparts. No black throat. Then it was gone. But here was a Mourning Warbler. Since the throat was not black I suppose it was a female or immature male."

Here is McIlwaine's unpublished account from his personal field notes:

On the morning of the 31st I was up in a little cove of woods and flying around were Canada Warblers, redstarts, vireos, downy woodpeckers, etc. In a tree appeared a warbler. I threw my glasses on it. Saw it distinctly for a few seconds. Sooty head and throat, no orbital ring, yellow underparts. No black throat. Then it was gone. But here was a Mourning Warbler. Since the throat was not black I suppose it was a female. But surely here seems to be evidence of this bird breeding in North Carolina. Eureka!

C.S. Brimley included McIlwaine's record in the 1942 update of *Birds of North Carolina*; however, the year of the sighting was incorrectly given as 1935.

McIlwaine was one of the first ornithologists to suggest possible breeding of the Mourning Warbler in North Carolina. In the past 40 years, breeding season sightings have been reported from the Great Smoky Mountains, Roan Mountain, the Balsam Mountains, and the Black Mountains, but an actual nest has never been confirmed in the state.



Gabriel Cannon is credited with providing the first dated sighting of a Mourning Warbler in the state of South Carolina. Cannon published his account in the magazine *Bird Lore* in 1940. He studied a male at close range and in good light in Spartanburg on May 24–25, 1940.

Mark Simpson published a detailed account of an adult male Mourning Warbler he located along the Rocky River floodplain in Cabarrus County on May 8, 1967. This was believed to be only the second published spring record of this bird in North Carolina. In Simpson's account he mentions Elmer Brown had an unpublished record of a Mourning Warbler in Salisbury during spring migration around 1947.

H. Lee Jones reported a probable Mourning Warbler in Charlotte on September 8, 1968. He noted the bird had "yellow from upper breast to and including lower tail coverts. Flesh colored tarsi, grayish-white throat," but, he noted he never was fully able to confirm the bird's identification to his personal satisfaction. Four years later, Jane Mullen reported a Mourning Warbler on the Iredell Spring Bird Count held on April 30, 1972. She found it "in an alder thicket along Rocky Creek at Sloan's Mill. Concealed by the thicket, she was able to see the grey hood and absence of eye ring and wing bars at close range."

Ranger Paul Hart reported finding a Mourning Warbler at Crowders Mountain State Park on May 24, 1985. Hart noted it was a male and that the bird remained silent. It had a black bib and lacked an eye-ring. Elaine Keene reported a Mourning Warbler in McAlpine Park in Charlotte on April 28, 1990. Unfortunately, no written details of this report were made available. David Wright heard a Mourning Warbler singing on September 4, 1991, at McAlpine Park. He later saw it, and the bird was seen by other birders later that day and the next. On September 3, 1999, Wayne Covington and Judy Walker discovered

an immature male just off the McAlpine Greenway in Charlotte. The bird was still present there 3 days later. Walker wrote:

I managed to pick up a life bird right here in Charlotte thanks to Wayne and Julie Covington. I got an excited call from Wayne Friday evening telling me he had just finished watching a young Mourning Warbler take a bath in his sprinkler. ... I thought the odds were good the bird might still be around because of the rain, fog and no wind so I went over last night to sit for a while. I had almost given up and was preparing to leave when the bird appeared nearly a half hour later than the other two nights. And it really put on a show exhibiting all of the proper field marks: large, chunky, bird; broken eye-ring; no wing bars; blue gray back (light could have been better); yellow on the belly all the way down to his undertail coverts, slight semblance of a hood although it was creamier with a hint of yellow under the throat.

A Mourning Warbler was reported in Charlotte on September 6, 2002. A month later, Ken and Alan Kneidel found one in Cabarrus County at Lake Don T. Howell on October 6, 2002. Taylor Piephoff had “an extended

encounter with a singing Mourning Warbler” at Six Mile Creek Greenway in southern Mecklenburg County on May 22, 2006. He reported the bird “gave only brief looks as it skulked in a blackberry thicket before crossing the creek and moving away, singing all the while.” Joe Poston observed a singing male in western Montgomery County on May 14, 2012.

John Scavetto sighted a possible Mourning or MacGillivray’s Warbler in southern Mecklenburg County, on September 5, 2010. Knowing the rarity of this species, he hurriedly grabbed his camera to try and document the bird. He was able to take a few quick photos and the result was a set of blurry pictures, but enough detail was discernible to prompt a good discussion of the bird’s identification. Scavetto submitted a photograph to the North Carolina Bird Records Committee for review. Unfortunately, after carefully reviewing the photograph, committee members were unable to reach a consensus on the bird’s identity. Either way, the bird was an extremely rare and exciting find. This sighting helps to remind us that many great birds are often seen for one brief moment and then they slip quietly away.

Our earliest spring sighting of a Mourning Warbler is 28 April, and our latest spring date is 24 May. Our earliest fall date is 3 September, and our latest date this bird was reported in the fall is 6 October.