

Northern Parula *Setophaga americana*



Folk Name: Blue Yellow-backed Warbler

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Bottomland forests—damp, low woods

“Cute.” That seems to be the most common adjective ascribed to this petite, energetic warbler. Although, “adorable” is certainly in the running as well. It is a colorful bird with a mix of blue gray, yellow green, bright yellow, and bold white, with the addition of a dab of reddish and black on the males. It is our smallest member of the warbler family, about the size of the tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, but this bird has a very short tail. As such, it can be hard to see amongst the foliage while it is foraging for insects and spiders in the top of a tree. Fortunately, the male is quite a loud and persistent singer and a patient observer, following the bird’s song, may soon be rewarded with a view of it.

The song of the Northern Parula has been variously described as a wind-up *zee-zee-zee* trill with an abrupt, punctuated, downward zip note at the end, or as a “quaint drowsy, little gurgling sizzle, chip-er, chip-er, chip-er, chee-ee-ee-ee.” It breeds in much of the eastern United States and throughout both Carolinas. It winters in some southern states, the Caribbean, Bermuda, Mexico, and Central America.

The Northern Parula is one of the first neotropical migrant warblers to return to the Carolina Piedmont each spring. It usually arrives in late March or early April and they are usually gone by the first or second week of October. Like many warblers, it migrates at night and tower kills of this species have been collected and photographed in the region. Our earliest spring arrival on file is 17 March, and our latest fall departure date is 20 October. Matthew Janson provided these remarks about the bird seen on 17 March in 2016:

Stunning male observed at close range, sitting still for good looks. Pale belly, yellow and orange on breast, and blue headed. Unmistakable. I’ve seen many many parulas. About a week earlier than my FOY last year at this same location. Naturally inquisitive and even flew down about ten feet away from the trail where broken eye ring, white wing bars, and slaty-blue back were visible.

Winter reports are very rare. David and Susan Disher reported a Northern Parula in Charlotte on Christmas Day in 1998. Penny Soares photographed one in her backyard in Mecklenburg County on 8 January and again on 28 January in 2008.



R.B. McLaughlin found a Northern Parula nest with eggs in Iredell County on May 11, 1887. In December of that year, he published a brief article describing another nest of the Northern Parula which he had found in Statesville several years earlier. He first noticed a clump of “moss” (possibly *Usnea* sp. lichen) hanging from a dead limb of a small maple tree. An adult warbler emerged as he climbed the tree to inspect and then it flew about him crying in distress as he cut off the branch to collect the nest. After he climbed down, he was surprised to discover the remains of another nest below this active one. There were two eggs in the active nest and one dried egg in the old nest below it, which appeared to have been abandoned earlier in the season. McLaughlin theorized that the first male may have died, and the female mated with a second male and nested above the first.

Elmer Brown reported the discovery of a nest in Rowan County in a letter to C.S. Brimley: “On May 8, 1926 Frank discovered a Parula Warbler building its nest high up in a large beech tree on a creek bank. The nest was about forty-five feet above the water, being only ten feet below the top of the tree, and was suspended from a small bunch of lichen. On May 16 the nest was finished and contained three fresh eggs.”

Elizabeth Clarkson continuously observed Northern Parulas at Wing Haven in June and July of 1946, probably the same bird or birds “seen repeatedly,” but she was unable to locate a nest. In 1947 in the city of Statesville, Grace Anderson reported a Parula Warbler “nesting here about this summer...I always find a few in woodlands near town, but this is my first town record.”

In 1952, Sarah Nooe at Queens College wrote to naturalist Charlotte Hilton Green: “Next year I want to

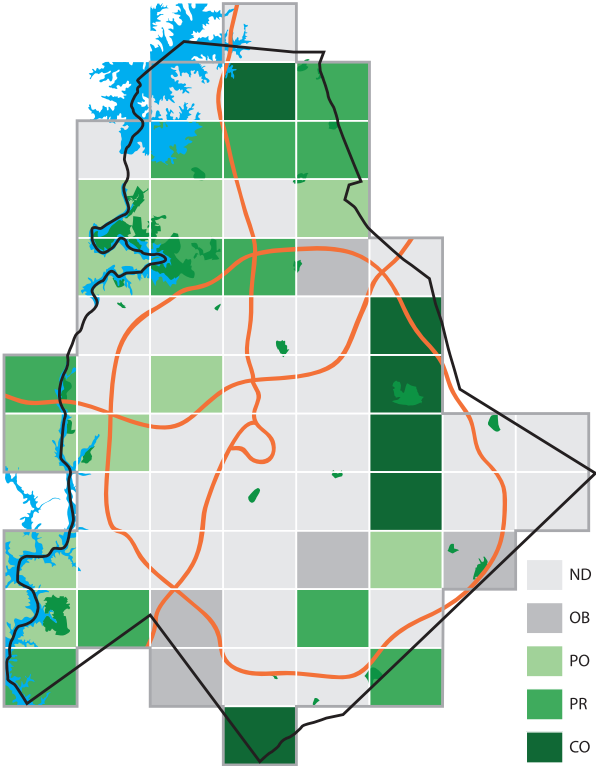
find a Parula Warbler nest. The Parula was on campus from April 15 until I left Charlotte July 21. I did not have a record between May 12 and June 14 but after that date the male was here until summer school closed. I found one dead male on July 6. My earliest fall date is Sept. 23 and the last date Oct. 8.”

Today in North Carolina, this warbler is an uncommon to fairly common breeder in the Piedmont. It is less common as one moves west across the province. According to ornithologist John Cely, the Northern Parula is a widely distributed warbler which breeds throughout South Carolina, but it is a relatively scarce breeding bird in the Sandhills and upper Piedmont regions of the state. Cely also noted that “for some unexplained reason(s), Northern Parulas have shown significant declines in South Carolina” from about 1960 through 2000.



Northern Parula during spring migration. (Jim Guyton)

Data collected by volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate the Northern Parula is currently breeding in less than one-third of the survey blocks, and it is not present in the most urbanized parts of the county.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/11, CO/6)