

Pine Warbler *Setophaga pinus*



Folk Name: Pine Creeping Warbler

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Pine forests

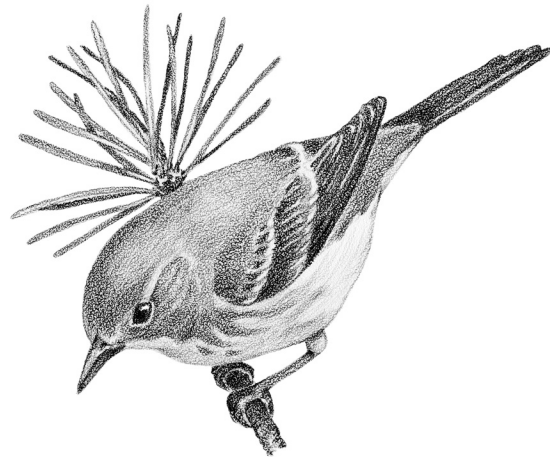
The Pine Warbler is our only resident warbler. It commonly nests in middle-aged to mature pine forests throughout the Carolina Piedmont. In winter, it associates with other Pine Warblers visiting from the North as well as mixed-species flocks of songbirds in open fields and in mixed woodlands. It often visits backyard bird feeder stations in the fall and winter. The musical trill of the Pine Warbler is well known to many people in the South, and the male will sing his song throughout the year.

R.B. McLaughlin published one of the first detailed accounts of the nesting of the “Pine-creeping Warbler” in the *Ornithologist and Oologist* in October 1887:

Its nest is rather difficult to find and the only way to have satisfactory results is by watching the bird go to it when building. It usually builds sooner than the collector would suspect; so when he climbs up to its nest the chances are he is greeted with open mouths. I have seen its nest filled with snow, and at times surrounded by icicles. Referring to my notebook for the last season, I observe that I found my first two nests [in Statesville] on March 16th; the one nearly completed, the other well begun; and took first set of four eggs on March 25th, incubation having commenced ...

The male is generally close by where the female is building, giving vent to a song...I am quite sure that he takes part in incubation, taking the female's place about noon. I have often called at the nest early in the afternoon and as late as sunset, and invariably found him seated upon it [the nest]. In this section, the nest is usually placed on a horizontal limb thirty—but varying from eight to sixty—feet from the ground. The outer portion consists of long thin strips of bark from grape vines, bits of dead weeds and the stems of dry oak leaves, intermixed with a very fine silken web or cocoon which the bird gathers from openings in the pine bark; web of the caterpillar is also often used. It lines freely with feathers, using a respectable quantity of horse-hair and dead tops of sedge also. The bottom consists mostly of feathers, and on the whole the nest is quite warm and neatly built.

The nests complement is found occasionally three, and in three or four nests I have seen five. The eggs are white with a bluish or purplish tinge,



spotted with purple, brown and black...if the bird is successful in rearing one brood, I do not think it attempts a second, but when disturbed in any way will build three times or perhaps oftener, in a season. I have never found it breeding, and seldom feeding, outside of pine timber.

McLaughlin later recounted his record of collecting four nest and egg sets of the Pine Warbler in just 2 hours. In one season, he collected 27 sets of Pine Warbler eggs near Statesville. All but one had a clutch of four eggs. The other had five eggs. He found collecting and selling eggs to oologists an excellent way to help pay his way through law school. Such was the science, pastime, and business of oology during that historical period.

On January 17, 1928, William McIlwaine wrote: “In the springtime I nearly break my neck, and certainly interfere with the circulation of blood to my head as I gaze and gaze into the tops of trees for the warblers. But last week I had the unusual privilege of having a little bird to come slowly down and light on the ground near me, and actually stop to be identified as a pine warbler.”

In May 1943, Elizabeth Clarkson reported the Pine Warblers had “deserted me in the last few weeks” when they normally are “in the yard all the year-round and eating off my window sill.” On October 2, 1959, Joe and Becky Norwood confirmed Pine Warblers were migrating south with other songbirds over Charlotte at night. They collected a specimen after it struck a television tower.

In 1957, Rhett Chamberlain shared an unusual encounter with a Pine Warbler at his home in Matthews. He jokingly hoped his sight record would be “acceptable” as the bird was observed “in good light at 18 inches through 1.25 bifocals” while perched on his hand:

It began on Feb. 18, '57, when I drove home from work. As I opened the car door this warbler flew directly to me and hovered at easy slapping distance before me. It was doubtless one of the regulars that we have at the feeders at the other side of the house every morning but I had never had one come so close to me before. Recovering partly from my amazement, I assumed that it was after food and I hastened across the yard to the house with the bird just behind me. I dug a teaspoonful of "glob" from the can in the refrigerator and went into the yard holding it well above my head. The bird promptly perched upon the handle of the spoon and began eating ravenously. I lowered the spoon to chest level for bifocal vision and looked over my catch. (I later realized that it was questionable who had caught whom.)

His bird repeatedly returned day after day looking for a personal handout and was rewarded by continuous spoon feeding. Once, the claws on the warbler's tiny foot pinched his fingers surprisingly tightly. Chamberlain, an engineer by trade, then came up with a plan:

I wondered at the "strength of his paw" and promptly set about measuring it. I made a simple gadget simulating a split branch and hinged it along

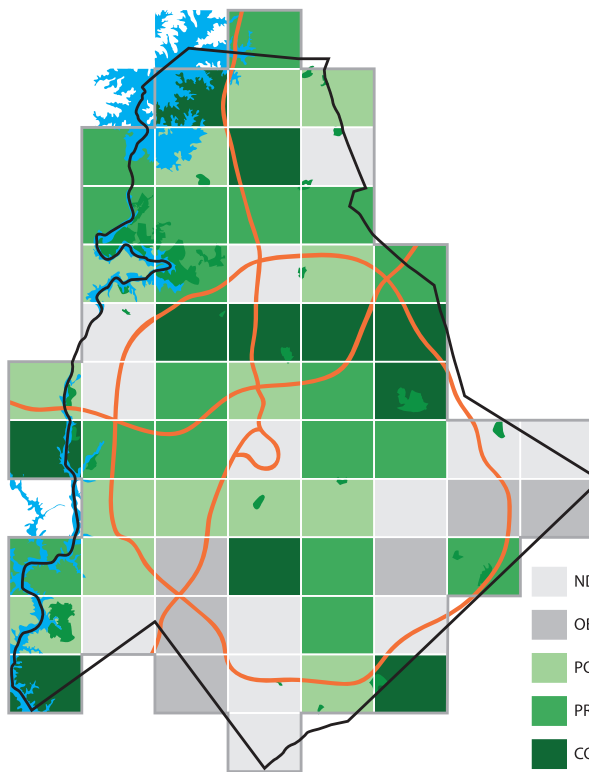
the upper edge strip of a Band-aid. A hair spring keeps the halves apart and a featherweight vane measures the separation on a simple scale. Frequent calibration against a Western Electric gram gauge permits the conversion. When leaning forward to take food, this Pine Warbler has a grip of 7 to 8 grams and when balanced and relaxed, 3 to 4 grams or 1.7 on the grip meter scale.

Chamberlain was able to both photograph and weigh the warbler while sitting atop his improvised scale. Later, another Pine Warbler joined the daily feeding:

No. 2 was not the trusting bird I knew No. 1 to be. This one usually perched sideways and kept both eyes on the camera. I finally got his grip, weight and photograph, however. He was a trifle stronger and heavier than No. 1. He had a "sassy" air about him and I suspect he didn't rate my food too high. I could readily separate the two by behavior. Fortunately, though, No. 2 was a marked bird. Two or three feathers on the left side of his mid-crown were twisted and pale yellow in color. I assume that he had been pecked in his youth and knowing him intimately I'm sure he deserved it. At his second visit he took charge and repeatedly drove No. 1 out of sight. In fact, the last I saw of either of them,



Pine Warbler. Pine Warbler on nest.
(Will Stuart, Kevin Metcalf)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/18, CO/11)

No. 2 was inches behind No. 1 in wild flight over our house. That was on the afternoon of Apr. 1. The nesting season was upon them and my lavish handout suddenly became a minor attraction. But I enjoyed the six weeks of pre-mortem examinations.

Keeping a close eye on a female Pine Warbler in early spring can often lead you to the discovery of a nest. Barry Rowan reported a female Pine Warbler carrying nesting material to a pine tree in Charlotte on April 1, 2015. Generally, Pine Warbler nests are built on a horizontal limb of a pine tree at least 6 feet away from the trunk and about 40–60 feet off the ground.