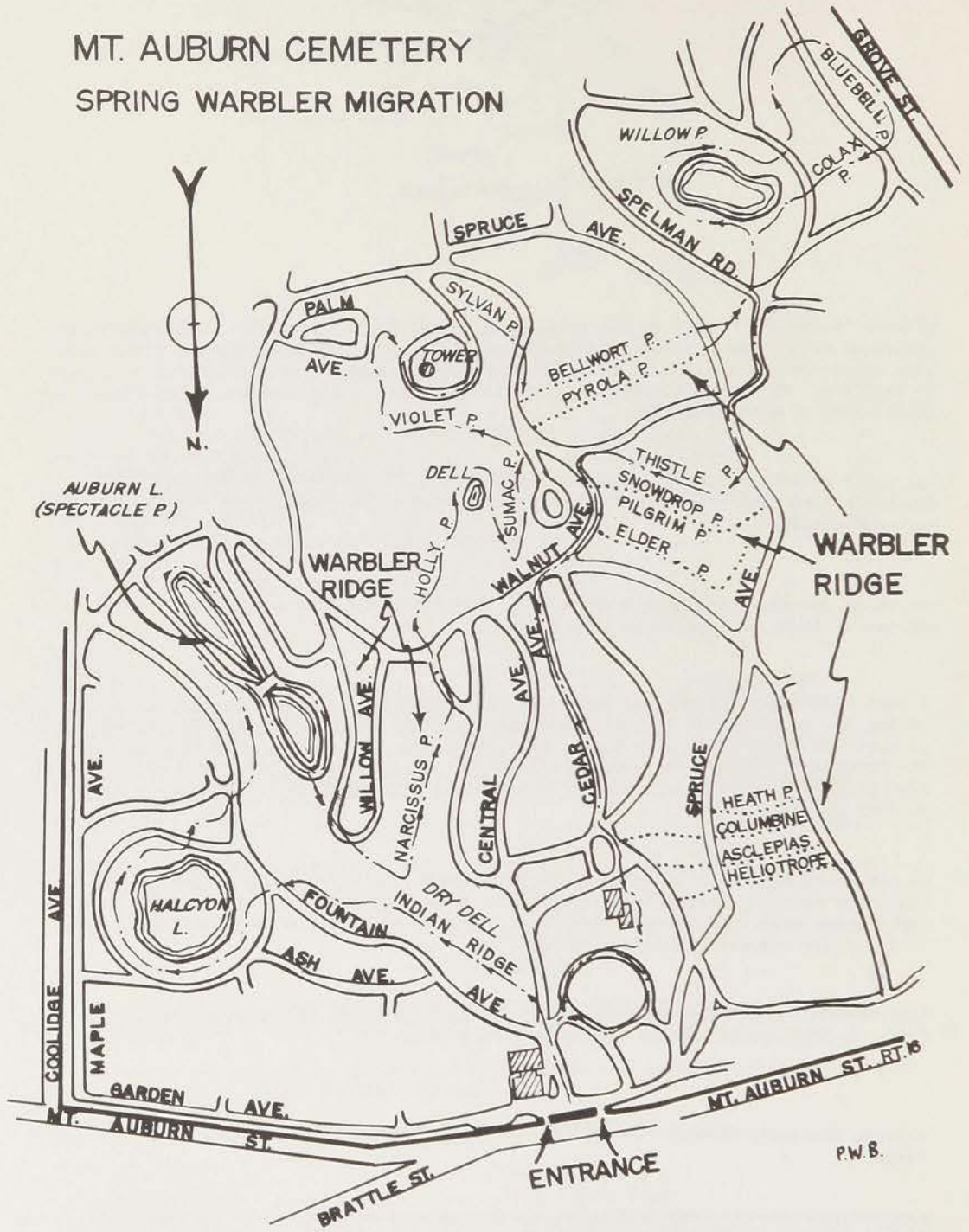


MT. AUBURN CEMETERY

SPRING WARBLER MIGRATION



SPRING WARBLER MIGRATION
MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY

Robert H. J. Stymeist, Cambridge

The warblers of North America, or wood warblers as they are formally called to distinguish them from the dull-colored Old World warblers, are small insectivorous birds with generally slender pointed bills.

Warblers are not to be confused with vireos or kinglets. They differ from the vireos in wing formula and are also readily distinguishable by their greater activity. The vireos' movements are deliberate, they peer. But warblers pirouette or flutter, turning this way and that, darting here and there, and embodying perpetual motion. Kinglets are smaller than the tiniest warbler. The golden-crowned kinglet's black-and-yellow crest is always diagnostic, as are the ruby-crowned kinglet's call and nervous habit of twitching its wings.

There are 53 species of warblers listed in Birds of North America by Robbins, Bruun, and Zim, but only about 30 can be seen regularly in Massachusetts. 15 genera are represented, each indicating similarities in habit and in plumage. The genus Wilsonia (Wilson's and Canada warblers) catch insects on the wing. Oporornis (mourning) are sluggish and stay close to the ground in thickets or brush and are usually the last group to arrive in Massachusetts. Seiurus (ovenbird, waterthrush) walk on the ground in search of insects and bob up and down like miniature spotted sandpipers. Dendroica (yellow, magnolia) are tree loving warblers with wing bars and tail spots. Vermivora (Tennessee, Nashville) generally lack wing bars, except for blue-winged warblers and their hybrids.

Seldom do warblers winter in Massachusetts, except myrtles that feed on bayberries along the coast (Cape Cod and Plum Island), or an occasional hardy yellowthroat, a few pine and palm warblers on the Cape, or a slim scattering of chats and orange-crowned warblers at feeding stations.

Most of our summer residents winter in Central and South America. Warblers are mainly night migrants but also make extensive journeys by day. The longest non-stop flight is across the Gulf of Mexico -- 500 miles from the Yucatan Peninsula to the Louisiana coast, or 150 miles to Cuba and another 150 to Florida. Then the northward migration continues with daytime stops for feeding.

Black-and-white warblers, which are early migrants, average about 13 miles per day and require a whole month to travel from North Carolina to Massachusetts. The farther north a warbler goes, the faster it migrates. One of the greatest travelers is the blackpoll. The least distance between its North American breeding grounds and its Brazilian winter home is 3,500 miles; the blackpolls that breed in Alaska have to cross 7,000 miles.

Migration is not an instantaneous event. The northward or southward flow is actually a series of "waves" that are influenced by weather. In spring, listen to the forecast: southwest winds bring birds in, while during autumn it is the northwest winds that aid their flight.

Though not acclaimed songsters like the thrushes, the warblers can hold their own. All the promise of spring seems to be stored in the Parula's sizzling gurgle. There is cheer in the simple song of the yellow warbler, and a serenity in the zeeing of the black-throated green as he sings from his perch in the hemlock woods. And then there is the potpourri of the yellow-breasted chat -- enough said!

Acquaintance with warbler songs will be of great assistance in making identifications. There are many fine recordings available at stores and also in your library's record department. By playing and replaying records the day before a birding trip, you might become familiar with a species that otherwise would slip by in the confusion of a big wave.

Now, where does one go for migrating warblers? The success of a birder depends far less on his location than one would suppose. The experienced eye will often glean a rich harvest from the apparently most unpromising fields. However, an increasing

familiarity with a certain place frees the mind and gives quicker discernment of all the hidden treasures. Let me offer to you Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.

Here is America's oldest garden cemetery, founded in 1831 by the Massachusetts Horticultural society. It has long been a favorite haunt for even the great birders. These acres have been under ever increasing surveillance, mostly in spring, and I think hardly a bird of interest now passes through without being seen. There are over 300 species of trees and shrubs in Mount Auburn, all of which are labeled. The spaced planting makes it easy to follow warblers, unlike the difficulty encountered in wood lots and the like, where birds get lost in the foliage.

I will not linger on identification, for field guides such as the Robbins' or Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds illustrate what you are looking at. I will attempt to reveal the best places within the cemetery to search, based on 10 years experience. at "Sweet Auburn." The map shows trails where warblers and other spring migrants can be easily seen. But feel free to wander -- remember, birds have wings!

The dates given for each species do not represent the earliest arrival nor the latest departure, but the interval when the likelihood of a sighting is greatest. The species are listed in order of arrival date and not by American Ornithological Union checklist convention. What to expect and when, varies every year due to weather and prevailing winds. Nevertheless, there are usually distinct waves around April 26th, May 2nd, 10th, 17th, and 24th.

PINE WARBLER: Dendroica pinus (April 10 - May 5)

Most often seen in the black pines at Washington Tower. These warblers are also frequently observed along the east side of the cemetery bordering Coolidge Hill Road. The song is an unbroken trill, clear and sweet.

PALM WARBLER: Dendroica palmarum (April 18 - May 8)

This tail-wagging ground feeder is most often seen near Halcyon Lake and Willow Pond.

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER: Mniotilta varia (April 26 - May 30)

Throughout the cemetery.

MYRTLE WARBLER: Dendroica coronata (April 26 - May 20)

Throughout the cemetery. The myrtle has a very distinctive "tchip" note that immediately identifies it.

PARULA WARBLER: Parula americana (May 1 - May 28)

Throughout the cemetery. This and the two preceding species are the most common migrants.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER: Dendroica virens (May 1 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery, though the best place is the Tower-Dell area. Formerly nested here.

YELLOW WARBLER: Dendroica petechia (May 1 - May 30)

This bit of feathered sunshine inhabits all the cemetery. It is especially fond of the areas around water, and occasionally breeds near Willow Pond.

AMERICAN REDSTART: Setophaga ruticilla (May 3 - June 5)

Recent breeder, 1970. Found throughout the cemetery. By far the most active warbler, constantly flitting about.

OVENBIRD: Seiurus aurocapillus (May 3 - May 20)

Common transient ground feeder, most often seen in the Tower-Dell area. Its loud and often repeated song is probably the best known of all warblers, "teacher, teacher, teacher."

NASHVILLE WARBLER: Vermivora ruficapilla (May 5 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery. Easily recognized by its song, a series of six, eight or more lively rapid notes that suddenly congeal into a pleasant rolling twitter, lower in pitch than the first part and about half as long.

MAGNOLIA WARBLER: Dendroica magnolia (May 5 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery. The favored location is the hemlock row at the base of the Tower at the Dell. The magnolia's song is easily remembered, "wee-to wee-to, wee tee-eet." The first four notes are deliberate, even, and low in tone, while the last three are hurried and of higher pitch. Can be confused with Nashville and chestnut-sided warblers.

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH: Seiurus noveboracensis (May 5 - May 25)

Common transient, most often found feeding under yews and rhododendrons around Halcyon Lake, Auburn Lake (known to birders as Spectacle Pond), Willow and Dell Ponds.

YELLOWTHROAT: Geothlypis trichas (May 5 - May 30)

Throughout the cemetery and most often seen near the ground in shrubs and thick foliage. This curious warbler responds amazingly to man-made "spishing" sounds.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER: Dendroica pensylvanica (May 6 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery.

BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER: Dendroica caerulescens (May 8 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery, though the best spot is the Tower-Dell area. The male is easily recognized, but the female is as obscure as the male is conspicuous, the only distinguishing mark being a white spot at the base of the primary wing feathers. The song of this warbler is perhaps the most versatile of the eastern migrants; its most common variation is an insect-like buzzing repeated three or four times, with a rising inflection.

PRAIRIE WARBLER: Dendroica discolor (May 8 - May 20)

Uncommon anywhere in the cemetery. The song is very familiar and easily identified, a series of buzzy notes ascending in a chromatic scale, sometimes fast, sometimes slow.

GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER: Vermivora chrysoptera (May 10 - May 20)

Uncommon transient visitor, most often seen during the bigger waves. The golden-winged can be easily located by its unique call, usually four or five notes of a buzzy quality, "shree-ee, zwee, zwee," the first prolonged and about two notes higher than the blue-winged.

BLUE-WINGED WARBLER: Vermivora pinus (May 10 - May 20)

Uncommon migrant, seen more often than the golden-winged. It is also located by its buzzing song, mostly of a two-note quality that resembles inhaling and exhaling, "zwe-ee-e-e, z-eeee," the latter usually just a sputter.

CAPE MAY WARBLER: Dendroica tigrina (May 10 - May 25)

Uncommon in certain years, though regular in others. This bird can be found throughout the cemetery, but it seems to have a preference for flowering crabapples. The Cape May's song is very similar to that of the black-and-white or the blackpoll, though the notes are shorter, a little louder, less thin, and more run together.

BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER: Dendroica fusca (May 10 - May 25)

Throughout the cemetery and usually very common during big waves. Very fond of oak trees during migration.

BAY-BREASTED WARBLER: Dendroica castanea (May 10 - May 25)

Uncommon transient throughout the cemetery. The best sites are near the tower and the warbler ridges in the oaks during the bigger waves.

WILSON'S WARBLER: Wilsonia pusilla (May 10 - May 30)

Throughout the cemetery and common especially in low shrubbery.

TENNESSEE WARBLER: Vermivora peregrina (May 12 - May 20)

Uncommon, but not as irregular as most people believe. This nondescript warbler easily escapes detection in the taller trees. If you learn the song, a very loud series of chips increasing rapidly and then suddenly changing into a mere twitter, you should have no problem finding this bird.

BLACKPOLL: Dendroica striata (May 12 - June 5)

Throughout the cemetery in large numbers. Around the third week of May, every other warbler you look at is a blackpoll.

CANADA WARBLER: Wilsonia canadensis (May 12 - May 30)

Common throughout the cemetery and preferring low shrubbery, such as surrounds the Tower-Dell area, Halcyon and Auburn Lakes, and Willow Pond.

By the first week of May nearly all of these warblers make an appearance, but not in any large numbers, excluding the black-and-white, Parula and black-throated green. During the second week the numbers increase, but the largest and best waves occur in the third week. They come through touching the tops of the trees and very quickly move on. The best places to observe this migration are the oak ridges between the Tower and Willow Pond, the crematory west, and between Auburn Lake and the dry Dell (see map). You should locate the wave, sit down, and let the birds come to you.

The following warblers might occur each year, though their appearance is not sufficiently regular to merit specific dates. They could occur at any time and should be looked for especially during waves.

WORM-EATING WARBLER: Helmitheros vermivorus

Occurs every year; sometimes as many as five can be seen. When a worm-eating is located, usually along the slope between the Tower and the Dell (Violet Path), a birder has an excellent chance of seeing it, for the word spreads fast around Mount Auburn. Another fair spot for this ground-feeding warbler is near Auburn Lake, where there are many mountain laurels and rhododendrons to hide this bird.

MOURNING WARBLER: Oporornis philadelphia

Uncommon, but occurs every year, usually between May 22 - June 5, when the show seems to be over until next spring, and when most of the birders quit, the mourning slips in. The best spots are along Indian Ridge Path and the east side of the Tower in the forsythia (Rose Path to Palm Avenue).

HOODED WARBLER: Wilsonia citrina

Uncommon transient visitor, most often seen in the Dell area. If one is found in the morning, it is likely to stay around all day. A singularity of this bird is its constantly spreading tail, not a wagging like the palm warbler. This action is the more noticeable because of the large white spots on the hooded's tail.

CERULEAN WARBLER: Dendroica cerulea

Rare, but somebody always sees one each year in the "biggie" wave. The song of the cerulean must be carefully listened for as it resembles that of the Parula, rolling up the scale quietly and evenly, less delicately, yet not more wiry.

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER: Vermivora celata

Another rarity that occurs each year somewhere in the cemetery. Most records are for the third week of May

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT: Icteria virens

Rare and not recorded every year. To be looked for in the thick shrubs along Indian Ridge, the Dell and the Tower area. Nesting record: June 6, 1884 (3 eggs), W. Brewster.

KENTUCKY WARBLER: Oporornis formosus

Very rare. The Kentucky's loud and musical "teakettle" song resembles that of the cardinal or Carolina wren, and readily betrays this bird's whereabouts.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH: Seiurus motacilla

Rare transient visitor to be looked for around the edges of Dell and Willow Ponds, as well as Halcyon and Auburn Lakes between April 22 and May 1. Plain throat, unlike the streaked northern waterthrush.

ACCIDENTALS

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER: Dendroica dominica

Rare: April 24-25, 1936, Tousey; collected by L. Griscom; also May 16, 1937, Sands.

LAWRENCE'S WARBLER: Vermivora lawrencei

Hybrid: May 14, 1964, various observers.

AUDUBON'S WARBLER: Dendroica auduboni

Rare straggler from the west. One record on November 15, 1876, Abbot M. Frazar; collected by W. Brewster. Is this species' close similarity to the ubiquitous myrtle a cause for its being overlooked?

HERMIT WARBLER: Dendroica occidentalis

One record: May 16-17, 1963, Osborn Earle and others

TO BE LOOKED FOR

PROTHONOTARY WARBLER: Protonotaria citrea

CONNECTICUT WARBLER: Oporornis agilis

Visitors are always welcome at Mount Auburn during open hours, 8 a.m. to sunset during the wintertime and 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. during spring and summer, except Memorial Day week when the gates stay open an hour later.

The Brookline Bird Club has daily trips through the cemetery during the month of May, starting at 6:30 a.m., at the main gate on Mount Auburn Street. The cemetery is easily reached by public transportation from Harvard Square, by taking the trackless trolleys to either Watertown or Waverly squares or the Huron Ave. Line.

Visitors, especially birders, should keep in mind that the cemetery is consecrated ground. The cemetery is not public property, is not a park, and is not a bird sanctuary.

Bibliography

- Brewster, William, The Birds of the Cambridge Region of Massachusetts, Nuttall Ornithological Club, Cambridge, Mass., 1906.
Chapman, Frank M., The Warblers of North America, D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1907.
Peterson, Roger Tory, A Field Guide to the Birds, Houghton Mifflin, Cambridge, Mass., 1947.
Parkhurst, H.E., The Birds' Calendar, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1894.
Robbins, Chandler S., Bartel Bruun, and Herbert S. Zim, Birds of North America, Golden Press, New York, 1966.

This was the weather situation that produced an excellent warbler wave (20 species) at Mount Auburn on May 20, 1971. The arrows indicate the direction of air flow, counterclockwise around a low (L) and clockwise around a high (H).

Favorable migratory conditions occur when there is a high-pressure area to the south. Circumstances may be improved by a low to the west, as in this case, which adds its winds to those of the high and stimulates migration. A low to the north can also be beneficial, acting as a barrier to prevent further northward bird movement.

Check your daily newspaper in order to anticipate favorable winds.

This map has been adapted from Weather-wise, Vol. 24, No. 4, published for the American Meteorological Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

