

ABOUT THE COVER: YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER

Nothing increases the pulse rate and sends people scrambling faster than the report of a Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica*) at Mount Auburn Cemetery or some other spring warbler trap. This beautiful and distinctive warbler has a gray back and nape, blackish wings and tail, a pair of white wing-bars, a black face and crown highlighted by a white patch behind the ear and white eye-stripe, a bright yellow throat, and white underparts dashed with black on the flanks — a truly flashy little warbler. It is behaviorally distinctive as well, creeping about tree limbs and trunks very much like a Black-and-white Warbler. The sexes have similar plumages, although the female has less black on her head and is generally duller.

Three subspecies are usually recognized: *D. d. flavescens*, found in the Bahamas, *D. d. dominica* of the Atlantic coastal plain, and *D. d. albilora* ("Sycamore Warbler"), the interior race. The mainland races differ in habitat choice and details of plumage (e.g., yellow lores vs. white lores) and bill shape and size. The Yellow-throated Warbler is part of a superspecies that includes Grace's Warbler of the west and Adelaide's Warbler of Puerto Rico and the Lesser Antilles. It occasionally hybridizes with the Northern Parula to produce "Sutton's" Warbler.

Atlantic coastal plain Yellow-throated Warblers nest from New Jersey to central Florida in cypress swamps and live-oak woodlands, especially in areas with lots of Spanish moss. They also nest in pine or mixed pine/deciduous woodlands. The inland race nests in cypress swamps and bottomland sycamore forests (hence "Sycamore Warbler") from southern Wisconsin south to the Gulf Coast. Yellow-throated Warblers winter along the southeastern Gulf and Atlantic coasts south through Florida and the Caribbean, and in Central America south to Costa Rica. Part of the southeastern population is sedentary.

In Massachusetts, this early migrant shows up in April or early May, often after coastal storms or in large flocks of Yellow-rumped Warblers. There have been more than fifty spring records and a scattering of late summer, fall, and winter records, mostly from coastal areas.

The breeding biology of the species is poorly known. Yellow-throated Warblers are probably monogamous, and produce two broods in the southern part of their range. During nesting season they are territorial, and the male's song has been described as a series of clear descending, slurred notes, ending in a rising note: *tee-ew, tew, tew, tew, wi* or *ching, ching, ching, chicher, cher, wee*. They also have *chip* and *see* call and flight notes. They nest high in the forest canopy, averaging 30-50 feet above the ground. They construct their nest in clumps of Spanish moss, if present, or atop a horizontal branch, often near the tip. The nest, constructed mostly by the female, is made of Spanish moss lined with grass, feathers or other soft materials, or in the case of open nests, of bark

and weed stems, often with caterpillar silk, lined with down or plant down. The clutch of four reddish or lavender-spotted grayish eggs is incubated by the female alone. Hatching probably occurs after 12-13 days, and fledging about 10 days later. Both parents feed the young.

The foraging of Yellow-throated Warblers is "creeper-like," gleaning foliage and probing crevices, bark, pine-cones, and needle clusters with their long bills. They occasionally hawk insects, flying out and taking prey on the wing. On their wintering grounds they are notoriously tame, foraging on buildings and occasionally entering houses in search of flies and other insects. I well remember a Yellow-throated Warbler spending a January morning climbing about the railings and walls of the Pelican Beach hotel in Dangriga, Belize, Central America — a delightful little sprite that showed no fear of humans whatsoever. Yellow-throated Warblers apparently eat mostly insects and spiders, but their dietary habits are poorly known.

The population structure of Yellow-throated Warblers is somewhat enigmatic, with a history of retraction and expansion of their breeding range for no apparent reason. The population is currently stable or increasing in most areas, and their range appears to be expanding northwards. They are rarely parasitized by cowbirds, but as nocturnal migrants, some are inevitably killed in collisions with T.V. towers and other structures. They have been reported killed by entanglement in spiderwebs! As with most species, future habitat alteration is a potential threat, but on their wintering grounds they are foraging generalists and seem to do well in disturbed, second-growth woodlands.

With the expansion of the range of the Yellow-throated Warbler northward along the Atlantic Coast, it may be that we in New England will have our spring-time birding brightened more frequently by the appearance of these magnificent little birds.

—William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Julie Zickefoose finds her niche on an 80-acre sanctuary near Whipple, Ohio, in the foothills of the Appalachians. Here she draws her inspiration from the woods and meadows where a dozen species of warblers, woodcock, Whip-poor-wills, and Yellow-breasted Chats make their home. Yellow-throated Warblers sing their descending songs from sycamores along nearby creeks.

Julie writes and paints regularly for *Bird Watcher's Digest* and *Country Journal*, specializing in mood pieces with a dash of natural history. She and her husband, Bill Thompson, III, editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, love to take three-year-old daughter Phoebe birding wherever they go.