

ABOUT THE COVER

Yellow-breasted Chat

The Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) is a poorly studied, enigmatic species. Despite being our largest wood warbler, it is infrequently seen. Chats are cryptic, skulking, furtive denizens of dense thickets and thus are often overlooked. Olive and gray above, they have a bright lemon-yellow throat and breast, white belly, and black lores that separate a white supercilium (eye stripe) from a white streak behind the bill. When (and if) you see this bird, it is unmistakable. The sexes are similar in plumage, and winter-plumaged birds are somewhat drabber. The taxonomy of this species has at times been contentious because it certainly doesn't look or act like a typical wood warbler. It is very large and robust in build compared with other wood warblers (e.g., three times the weight of an American Redstart) and has a large, curved upper mandible, long tail, an un-wood warbler-like vocal repertoire and several anatomical features that are uncharacteristic of wood warblers. Its placement in the *Parulidae* has thus been challenged, but recent DNA analysis confirms its wood warbler status. Two subspecies are recognized, *I. v. virens* in the East and *I. v. auricollis* in the West, commonly called the "long-tailed chat."


The Yellow-breasted Chat is widely distributed in the east but has a more patchy distribution in the western United States, southern Canada, and northern Baja. In Massachusetts it is a rare and local breeder and an uncommon migrant. Chats are rare but regular in winter and have been seen at feeders. Some chats, particularly immature birds, apparently disperse north after breeding, which may account for birds that overwinter here. Most, however, are trans-gulf migrants that winter in Mexico and Central America.

Chats are generally monogamous, but the occasional male has two mates. They usually produce a single brood. They dwell in dense thickets that are characterized as low, dense, early second-growth, along power lines, in clearcuts, along streams, pond edges, fence rows—mostly habitats that are ephemeral in nature. Males have a rather bizarre song, more like a thrasher or mockingbird than a wood warbler. They are excellent mimics, and their songs have been described as rattles, whistles, catcalls, grunts, chuckles, mews, scolds—all rather unmusical. Females don't sing but do utter *cuk-cuk* and *cheow* calls. Males perform display flights both to attract females and for territorial advertisement. The flight, accompanied by song, is jerky and bouncy with exaggerated wing-beats, legs hanging, and tail often partly spread. Males sometimes fight at territorial boundaries, fluttering up into the air and grappling with their feet. Males guard their mate closely before egg laying, but not always successfully. In one DNA fingerprinting study about a third of nests had at least one chick sired by a different male. Chats are sedentary and territorial on the wintering grounds where they occupy the same scrubby habitat that they do for breeding.

Females build the nest, a bulky cup of twigs, bark, and leaves, lined with fine grass. The nest is usually placed in a thicket close to the ground. The usual clutch is

3-5 creamy eggs, spotted with a spectrum of browns, reds, and purples. Only the female develops a brood patch, and she alone incubates the eggs for the 11-12 days to hatching. The chicks are altricial (naked and with their eyes closed). The female broods the chicks, but they are fed a diet of insects by both parents and fledge in a little over a week.

Yellow-breasted Chats are foliage gleaners, foraging in low dense thickets and sometimes on the ground. In summer they eat mostly small invertebrates, including spiders, ants, wasps, mayflies, cicadas—about anything small that crawls or flies. They also eat fruit, and in winter fruit may be an important component of their diet.

Chat populations probably increased during the nineteenth century as forests were converted to farmland and are currently decreasing in the northeast as reforestation occurs. Breeding Bird Surveys indicate that some populations are increasing and others decreasing. Chats are not threatened nationally but are listed in some states. They rapidly colonize their patchy short-lived habitat as it becomes available and move from areas where thickets have grown into woodland or forest. Nesting near the ground, chats are vulnerable to nest predation by snakes and mammals, and their edge habitat is frequented by jays and other avian nest predators. Their nests are frequently parasitized by cowbirds, with various studies reporting 5 to 91 percent of nests containing cowbird eggs. Because they are nocturnal migrants they often collide with man-made structures. Considering the ephemeral nature of their preferred habitat, the high levels of nest predation and parasitism due to edge effects, and losses during migration, it is a wonder that these un-wood warbler-like warblers do as well as they do. 

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About the Cover Artist

David Sibley has written and illustrated articles on bird identification for *Birding* and *North American Birds* as well as regional publications and books, including *Hawks in Flight* and *The Birds of Cape May*. Since 1980 David has traveled the continent watching birds on his own and as a tour leader for Wings, Inc. He wrote and illustrated the monumental *Sibley Guide to Birds*, a comprehensive guide to North American birds, which has been followed by a companion volume, *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior* (illustrated by David A. Sibley, edited by Chris Elphick, John B. Dunning, Jr., and David A. Sibley). More recently, David has published *Sibley's Birding Basics*, *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America*, and *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*. You can see more of his artwork at his website <<http://www.sibleyart.com>>. He lives in Concord, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. 