

Prothonotary Warbler

Protonotaria citrea

Deep in the woods on the edge of a creek, a prothonotary warbler forages for bugs at the base of a hollow tree. Its rich golden-yellow head seems to flash like a light through the dark limbs of the forest. This warbler's brilliant coloring led it to be named for the prothonotary, or chief clerk in an English court of law, who wears a bright yellow robe. Its beauty makes it a popular species among bird watchers.

History and Status

The number of prothonotary warblers in North Carolina has been growing slightly over the past 25 years. The comeback of the beaver in North Carolina, and the swampy, forest habitat that the beaver creates, may contribute to the success of the bird in the state. Nationally, prothonotary warbler populations remain stable, as well.

Description

The prothonotary warbler, a native species in North Carolina, is a small, well-proportioned songbird that grows to about 5 ½ inches in length. The male sports rich golden-yellow feathers on its head and belly. Its back is more olive yellow, and its wings a slate blue with no wing bars. The female's coloring is similar, but duller. Prothonotary warblers have short, slender, pointed bills and shiny black eyes.

Habitat and Habits

As the temperatures warm in spring, prothonotary warblers and their cousins migrate from

the tropics to eastern North America to breed. Prothonotaries prefer aquatic and wetland habitats such as wooded swamps, flooded bottomland forests, beaver ponds and streams with dead trees.

Courting begins after they arrive in late March and early April, with the male fluffing and displaying his plumage to a potential mate. Once paired, both adults prepare a nest. Prothonotaries do not build open nests, but use old tree cavities made by woodpeckers, or bird boxes, mail boxes and other ready-made niches. They line the nest with fine grasses, twigs, bark, moss and dead leaves to form a neat cup. Typically, they nest about 3 to 15 feet above ground and over water. Prothonotaries are the only warblers in North Carolina that nest in cavities such as these.

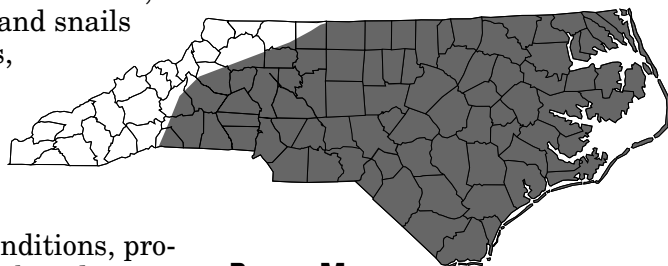
The protective woods provide food as well as shelter. Prothonotary warblers prefer to forage near the ground, but not on it, feeding on insects and snails around tree trunks, on long limbs and in shrubs. Nearly all of their feeding is in the vicinity of water.

With suitable conditions, prothonotary warblers breed twice in North Carolina. The first

brood generally appears in early May, and the second in late June. The female incubates five to six creamy white eggs with purple spots for about 13 days. Often the male feeds her as she warms the eggs. When the eggs hatch, both adults tend the young. Sometimes, several prothonotary warblers may chase or "mob" a predator such as an Eastern screech owl to defend a nest or territory. Snakes also prey on these tiny songbirds.

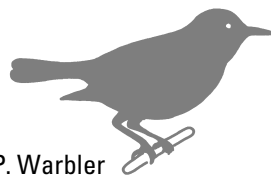
Fledgling warblers leave the nest in 10 to 11 days, but the bird family will remain together for a short time in the same territory. Prothonotary warblers typically do not roost, flock or migrate together in large groups.

The prothonotary warbler's conspicuous yellow plumage makes it easy to spot in forests. Its call and voice also make it distinct—a loud, metallic-sounding chip or chirp. Its song is a ringing note, repeated six to eight times,



Range Map:

Occupied range



P. Warbler

sounding like sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet.

Prothonotary warblers remain in North Carolina through the summer, leaving around August to winter in Central and South America.

Range and Distribution

Prothonotary warblers can be found from southern Ontario and western New York, west to Minnesota, and south to Texas and the Gulf Coast of Florida. In North Carolina, they are common summer residents throughout the Coastal Plain. Prothonotaries breed sparingly in Piedmont North Carolina counties and very rarely in the mountains.

People Interactions

The prothonotary warbler's brilliance make the bird popular among bird watchers. A good way to view this bird in its habitat is by canoe. Prothonotaries will use bird houses if they are placed near a suitable habitat like a beaver pond.

Man-made reservoirs have destroyed some habitat in the state. But as beavers continue to thrive in the state, their swampy homeland provides suitable habitat for the prothonotary warbler to live.

References

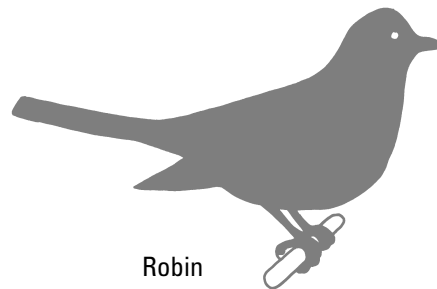
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House Sparrow



Robin

PROTHONOTARY WARBLER

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

Length: 5 to 5 ½ in.

Food

Insects and snails

Breeding

Mate in early spring and in summer, producing two broods each season.

Young

Female lays 5 to 7 eggs, then incubates them for about 13 days. Young remain in the nest 10 to 11 days, and with family for a short time afterward.

Life Expectancy

1 to 2 years on average, very rarely to 5 years

Credits

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