

Bird of the Yellow Mask

The distinctive hooded warbler sings its song throughout the East and South

I was wandering along a trail that ran parallel to a small, heavily shaded creek. I noticed some movement under the trees and over the gurgling waters. A small bird was foraging through low-growing shrubs, flitting about lightly, almost as if dancing. Sometimes, it would fly out over the tiny creek and snatch a flying insect, or hover over a large-leafed sapling to pick off a small caterpillar or beetle.

It was the first time I had seen a hooded warbler.

The hooded warbler is a common breeding warbler found mainly in the southern and eastern United States, with some nesting in the northern U.S., New England and southern Ontario. A little over 5 inches long, males have olive-green upperparts, with a bright yellow forehead and cheeks, surrounded by a black hood over the top of the head, back of the neck, and on the chin and upper part of the breast. The tail is rounded with noticeable white outer tail feathers.

Females are similar but generally duller and usually lacking the rich black hood, although occasionally some are so marked, making them different to distinguish from males. Hooded warblers have relatively large eyes that stand out against the bright yellow face.

Like other warblers, the hooded bird is very active as it feeds, flicking and fanning its tail open and shut, revealing the white tail feathers. Its relatively

large bill is a little bit flattened at the base, with hair-like bristles, much like a flycatcher. Some of its foraging is done like a flycatcher as it feeds on small insects, wasps, spiders, beetles, moths, flies, aquatic insects, caterpillars and aphids.

In the mountains and northern breeding areas, hooded warblers favor stream bottoms, swamps and wet hollows with heavy undergrowths of laurel, rhododendron, blackberry and grape vines, and beneath combinations of ash, oak, beech, cherry, cedar and hemlock.

In the South, they gravitate to swamplands of tupelo, cypress, palmetto and cane. During nesting, the males will forage in the upper canopy and sing from high perches

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while the females forage near the ground.

The song of the hooded warbler is loud and clear and sounds somewhat like, "weeta, weeta, wee-TEE-cha," rising in pitch with emphasis on the ending. In Virginia, their call can be heard in late April as they arrive mainly from coastal Texas and Louisiana. Males arrive first and establish their territories, with females following a week or so later.

Females build their nests low in shrubs, especially rhododendron and laurel thickets in the mountains, or in cypress or cedar swamps in the lowlands. The nest is formed in the fork of a branch, made up of leaves and plant fibers, held together with spider silk, and lined with fine grasses, rootlets and animal hair. It often appears as a ball of leaves stuck in the branch.

Warblers lay about three to five eggs, basically white with reddish-brown and purple markings. Incubation takes 12 days and the young fledge in another 10 or 12 days. The male will complete feeding chores of the first brood while the female begins a second brood.

The fall migration brings birds down the eastern part of its range along the coast, and can begin as early as late July. The hooded is one

of the warblers that retains its colors of spring. Migration peaks in September with stragglers into early October. They winter in eastern and southern Mexico, Panama and the West Indies, with some staying in the U.S. Gulf states. ■

