

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Pine Warblers

In the Pines, in the Warbling Pines



Most people when they think of warblers visualize bright gems of yellow and gold flitting through the treetops in the spring. They are a passing fad appearing with the warm weather and disappearing with it as well. In all this hustle and bustle to see the passing hordes we often forget about the little dynamo which occupies many of our backyards all year long - the Pine Warbler.

If you have pines in or around your yard and Brown-headed Nuthatches coming to your feeder there is probably at least one or two Pine Warblers hanging around somewhere. And I do mean hanging since one of their favorite activities is to hang upside down on pine cone looking for insects and seeds. Like all warblers the Pine Warbler is an insect eater. However, its ability to change its diet when insects become scarce is the main reason this bird is able to hang around our neck of the wood when all its relatives abandon our humble shores.

When insects aren't available, which is not very often in the south, the Pine Warbler switches to berries and seeds. They particularly like berries of Poison Ivy, Dogwood and Virginia Creeper along with pine and sumac seeds. They will also come into suet and peanut feeders. With food preferences like these it is easy to see why they like most of our backyards. My yard has all of the above including several suet feeders. The birds in the area think they died and went to heaven.

With a drab olive back the Pine Warbler is not one of the showiest of the warblers. However, if the light is right, the yellow under the chin and on the breast can glow like gold. Other field marks include two white wing bars, a faint eye-ring and sometimes streaking along the sides of the breast and flank. Females and immature males are generally duller.

What the Pine Warbler lacks in color, I think it more than makes up in its song. The term warbler is a misnomer for many in the family. Most of their songs do not in the slightest way resemble a warble. Many are not even very musically. That is not the case for the Pine Warbler. Its musical trill is a delight to the ear. I have one bird in the neighborhood which sounds like a canary. Pine Warblers

are also very generous with their songs. In the summer they will sing into the heat of the day. And on warm days in the winter they will brighten woods and your heart with its sweetness.

The bird is also not shy at all. One time when watering flowers on a hot, dry day a pine warbler appeared in a nearby bush. It then proceeded to fly through the spray to take a bath with me holding the hose! It has also tried to land on my suet feeder as I was putting up.

Because the Pine Warbler eats insects during most of the year I hear it more than see it. But now with the colder weather approaching the little bundles of energy and light begin to reappear around the Dogwood trees and Virginia Creeper. And I know as soon as the suet goes out they will again be at my kitchen window. It's one of the pleasures of winter I hope you will be able to experience this year.

