

Often Overlooked Warbler ID Points

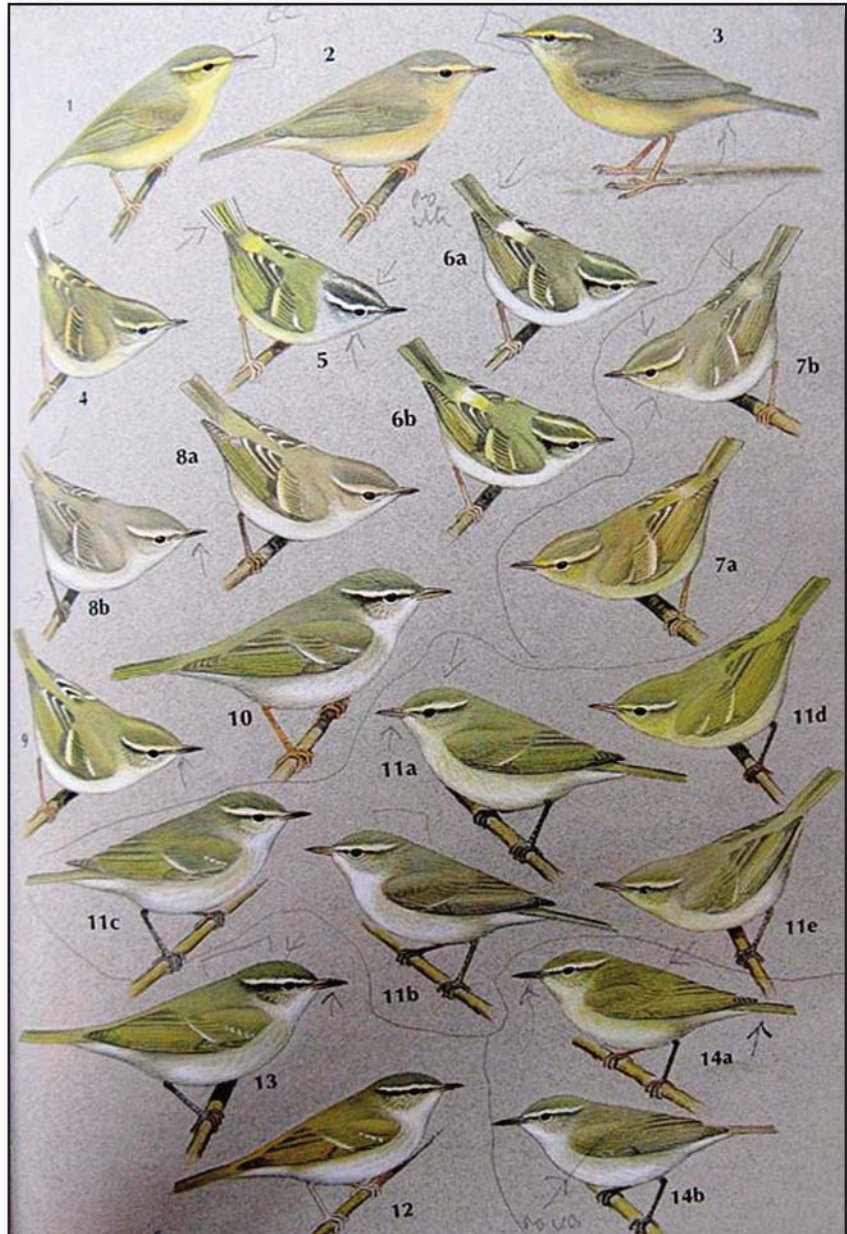
By Tom Stephenson

All photos by Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle

We're very lucky here in the United States: our warblers are some of the most beautiful birds in the world. Pity the poor folks in the "Old World"! Their warblers are incredibly drab. This page actually illustrates 14 different, (and challenging to identify), old world species:

But wait... could the great beauty of our warblers actually be a liability? Could all of the colorful markings on many of our birds blind us from seeing characteristics like shape and subtle plumage features which are necessary points for "old world" birders? And thus, dependent on the most obvious or flashy ID points, are we less able to identify our warblers when we see drabber plumages or partial views?

I had an experience leading a birding group a few years ago that was one of the prime catalysts for writing *The Warbler Guide*. Two participants were looking at a bird as shown in the photo below. They were asking: "Is this a Yellow Warbler or a Wilson's? If only we could see its cap..."



14 species of Old World "Warblers"



More on this bird in a minute...but the important point for the moment is that many birders are dependent on just one or two very obvious ID points per species. Without these points they are at a loss when they encounter an unknown bird. And since their eye is trained to see these only these bright features, they often don't spend time looking more carefully once they know the identity of a species. In other words, they know the ID points and they've found them, so they stop looking.

A few of our legacy field guides are complicit in this problem. These books point out the important and most obvious field marks, but overlook or even "average out" a warbler's shape and some of the subtler ID points, often just showing the bird using a generic "warbler" form.

These next two plates illustrate this problem. The presence or absence of back streaking in these two species, which are known to be difficult to separate in the fall, has been presented as an important feature. But the tail lengths seem generic, with the length of the Blackpoll's tail shown as even a bit longer than the Pine's. The primary projection looks longer on the Pine and its wing bar contrast and tertial edgings are nearly as bright as the Blackpoll's. The undertail view is not shown and thus any differences for that feature are not considered.



Blackpoll and Pine Warblers

In fact, the Blackpoll's tail is distinctly shorter than Pine's —a very important ID point. The primary projection on Blackpoll is longer —not shorter— than Pine, since Blackpolls are much longer distance migrants and have longer wings. And finally, the Blackpoll has strongly contrasting wingbars and tertial edgings, while Pine's are much lower contrast. So while these plates do offer some useful information, they also obfuscate some other points that can very often be critical for identification.

In this article, I'll briefly cover a few of the less obvious, and often overlooked, warbler features that many times are more important than the often-cited, more obvious marks. This is an introduction to what we'll cover in greater detail in the lecture in October.

NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S WING BARS

Wing bars can be a good ID filter. This is usually a “yes or no” process: are there two white bars on the side of the bird or not?



Blackpoll showing generic white wing bars

But the covert feathers that form the wing bars are worth studying in greater detail as they often offer important clues beyond just the presence or absence of white tips. In fact, three of our US warbler species have diagnostic covert patterns that would not necessarily make the “cut” to the wing bar group as they are not contrastingly white.

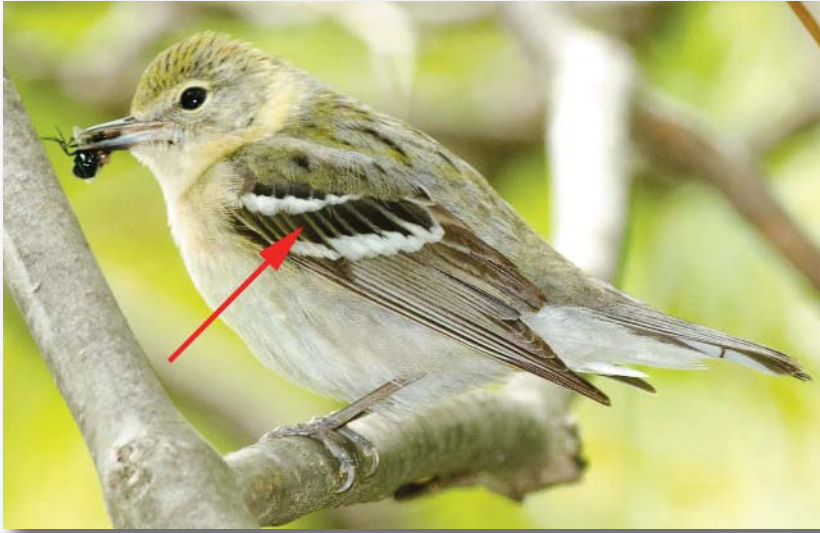


Palm Prarie and Yellow Warblers showing diagnostic covert patterns

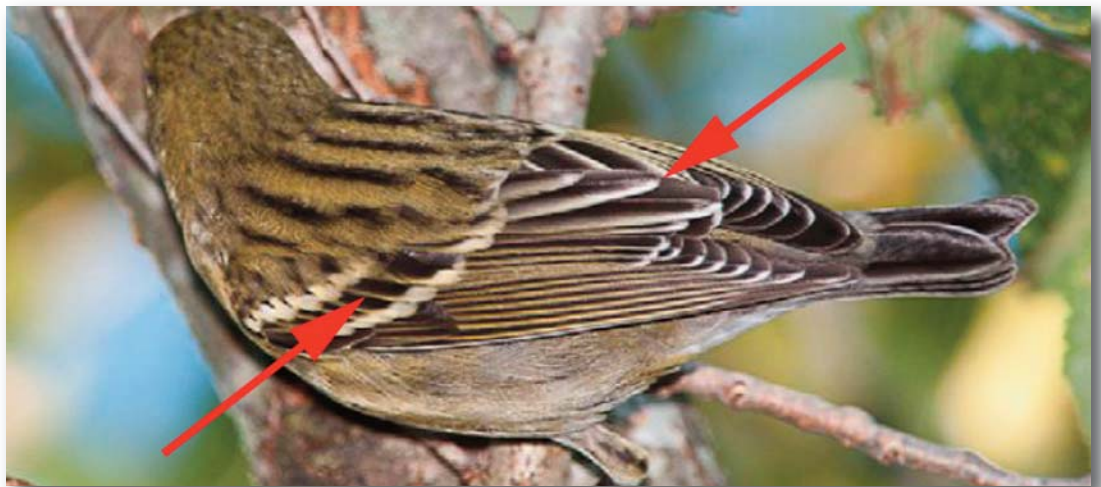


These features: the large buffy tips to the brown covert feathers of the Palm Warbler, the broad yellow tips of Prairie's brownish covert feathers, and the bright yellow tips blending in with yellowish flight feathers and tertial edgings on the Yellow Warbler, are enough to identify each of these species.

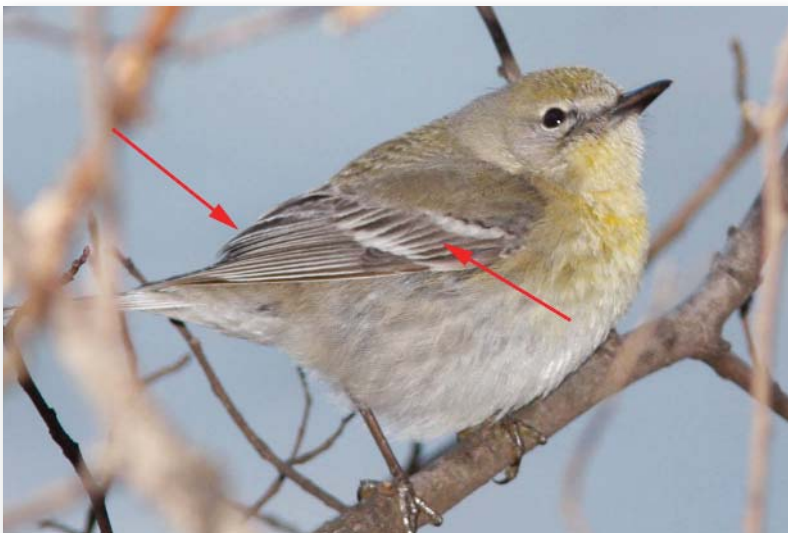
The color and contrast of the feathers “between” the wing bars also deserves attention. Following up with our Blackpoll and Pine warblers from above and adding Bay-breasted, here are photos showing the differences in the color of the base of the greater secondary coverts, the feather area above the lower wing bar. This difference in color and contrast can be a very important field mark.



Bay-breasted showing very high contrast covert bases



Blackpoll, showing very dark, contrasting bases to greater coverts and contrasting white edgings to tertials and flight feather tips



Pine Warbler, showing very gray covert bases with little contrast, and pale, low-contrast flight feather edgings

THE EYELINE, SUPERCILIUM, SUPRALORAL AND LORES

Another frequently passed-over warbler feature, that often deserves more respect, is the supercilium and related areas. The eyeline and supercilium (or “eye brow”) is often used when it is very prominent, as in these two warblers.



Northern Waterthrush with a high contrast supercilium



Worm-eating Warbler's prominent supercilium and crown stripe

But the extent of the subtler differences in eyeline length, contrasting supercilium and eye arcs can be more important when separating Orange-crowned and Tennessee Warblers.



Orange-crowned Warbler's very limited eyeline and supercilium are less contrasting than its white eye arcs, giving it a "plain-faced" look



Tennessee's stronger, longer eyeline and more contrasting supercilium dominate its facial features

These marks can be even more useful when separating other confusing fall warblers. For example, Pine, Blackpoll and Bay-breasted can have subtle but—especially in the case of Pine Warbler—important differences in their eyeline and supercilium.

On the Pine Warbler the supercilium is concentrated mostly, if not completely, in a brighter, contrasting supraloral area (the part of the supercilium in front of the eye) that can sometimes be bright enough to look like head-lights. The eyeline in a fall Blackpoll is usually longer and more defined than that of the Bay-breasted, which has a more blank-faced look.

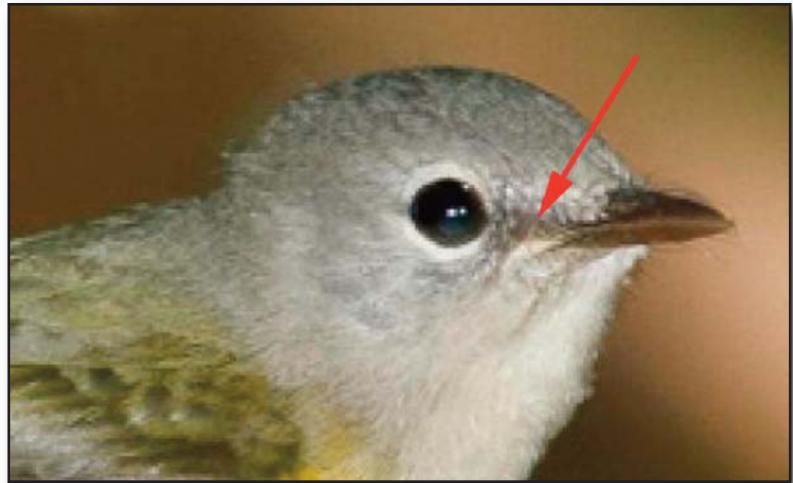




Pine Warblers showing minimal eyelines and strongly contrasting supraloral areas

The loreal area, the part of the eyeline that is in front of the eye, can be a useful ID mark for some species. For example, two birds with grayish heads and few striking ID points are Lucy's Warbler and American Redstart. Although not commonly found together, there are records of American Redstart in a number of locations in Arizona where Lucy's occurs.

In addition to having more contrast between the gray head and back, the American Redstart female usually has dark lores. This is a good differentiator from Lucy's pale lores, especially if you only get a brief view of the head.



American Redstart and Lucy's showing differences in their lores



TERTIALS AND FLIGHT FEATHER EDGING

Another group of feather features that can be very useful is the flight feather edgings. The wide, white, contrasting tertial edgings that blend into its white lower wing bar are diagnostic for Black-and-white Warbler.



Here are photos of three, possibly confusing, fall warblers:



Notice that the left warbler has strong back streaking, contrasting wing bars with very dark bases to the greater coverts, and white tips on the tertials and flight feathers. All of these marks point to Blackpoll.

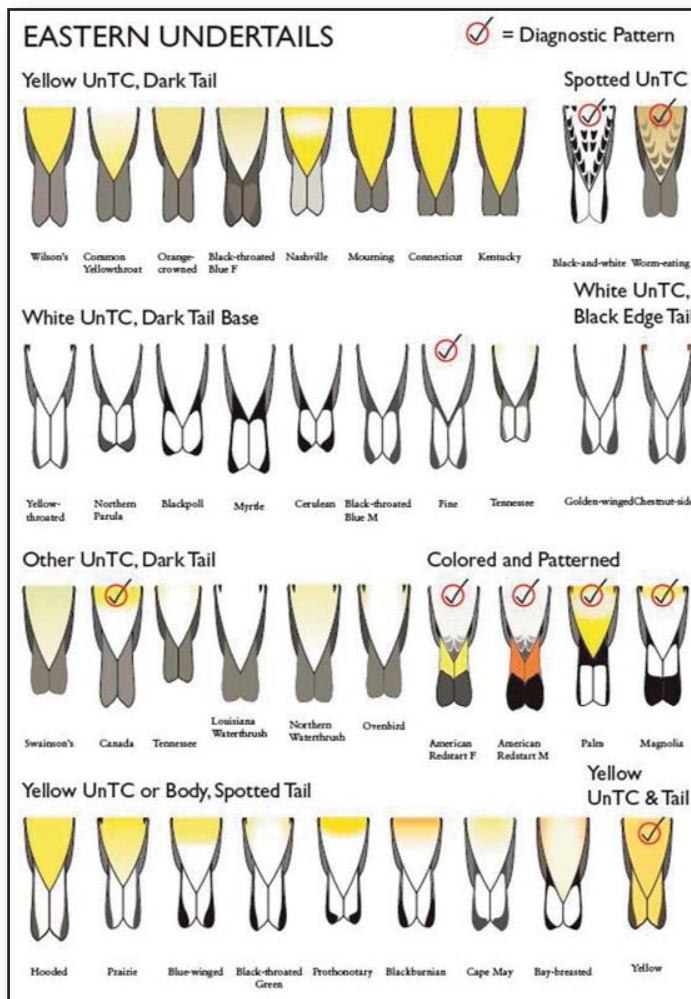
The middle photo has very low contrast, thin flight feather edgings and pale bases to the greater coverts, all good ID points for Pine Warbler.

The right photo shows only limited lighter edging on the coverts (so no real wing bar), but has strong yellow-green edgings on the flight feathers. These features, along with the yellowish rump, are diagnostic for a drab Cape May Warbler.

THE UNDERTAIL

The undertail, including the vent, undertail coverts, and tail, are probably the most underused ID points for warblers (and many other species.) The first comprehensive treatment of warbler undertails is in the excellent *A Field Guide to Warblers of North America* by Dunn and Garrett. We have expanded on that concept in *The Warbler Guide*.

Along that line, let's revisit the first photo, the problem bird that some of the group thought might be either a Yellow or a Wilson's Warbler. In fact, these birds are often easier to separate from below than from eye-level. Yellow Warbler has a very short, wide and predominantly yellow tail. A Wilson's has a long, thin and dark tail, as evident in the photo.



Here is one of the undertail finders from our book, which illustrates any species that could be confused with Wilson's when seen from below.

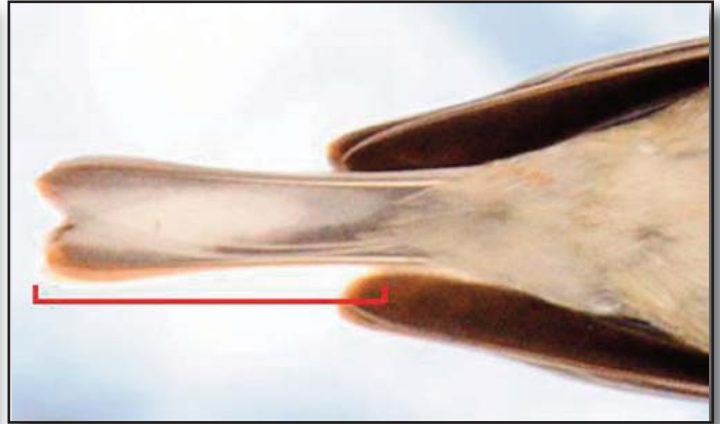
Undertail Finder from *The Warbler Guide*

The only other real candidate, with a long dark tail and yellow undertail coverts, would be Orange-crowned. However this Wilson's has a stronger, more saturated yellow body, lacks any faint streaking and has a thicker bill with a light lower mandible.

Finally, let's take a look at the shapes of Blackpoll and Pine Warblers discussed at the beginning of the article. From these photos it is easy-to-see the great difference in shape of these two species. In particular, Pine Warbler has a much longer tail extension past the undertail coverts. Especially when seen from below, these two birds have very different shapes. There is no need to look for back streaking to separate these two species, which are not as easily confused when one focuses on the right details.



Blackpoll shows very short tail extension



Pine shows very long extension past the undertail coverts



Blackpoll Warblers showing very short tail extension and a wide, boat-shaped body



Pine Warbler showing its very long tail extension

Hopefully some of the areas covered here will stimulate your study of warblers and birds in general. During the lecture we'll study many more examples from these and other plumage features as well as additional, often overlooked ID points that can help make warbler identification easier.

In *The Warbler Guide* we have a chapter on what to notice when looking at warblers, covering the above and other topics; and also present direct comparisons of any similar-looking species on each of the warbler's master pages. For more information on *The Warbler Guide*, check out *The Warbler Guide's* Facebook page and also www.TheWarblerGuide.com. 🐦

© 2013, Tom Stephenson

Tom Stephenson has been birding since he was a kid under the tutelage of Dr. Arthur Allen of Cornell University. His articles and photographs are in museums and many publications including Birding, Birdwatcher's Digest, Handbook of the Birds, Handbook of the Mammals of the World, and Guide to the Birds of SE Brazil. He has lectured and guided many groups across the US as well as in Asia, where he trained guides for the government of Bhutan. He has donated many recordings of Eastern Himalayan rarities and other Asian species to Cornell's Macaulay Library of Natural sounds. He was on Zeiss's digiscoping team for the World Series of Birding and in 2011 his own team won the World Series Cape Island Cup.

As a musician he played concerts and did studio work for many years, working with several Grammy and Academy Award winners. His clients included the Grateful Dead, Phil Collins and the FBI. He joined Roland Corporation in 1991, managed the recorder division, and retired recently as Director of Technology. His latest book, THE WARBLER GUIDE, is published by Princeton University Press.

