

The Birder's Eye

Warbling away in the springtime!



Blackcap by S. Thompson

I am sitting here in rural Suffolk; one of the eastern counties in East Anglia where we have just enjoyed one of the warmest Easter weekends on record. Blue skies, a southerly jet stream coming from the Continent – all make for more good spring migration conditions here in Merry Olde England.

Like their namesakes in North America, the Old World Warblers are highly migratory and millions of them make the journey from Africa north into Western Europe each spring, and like birders in the US, European birders look forward to their arrival every spring. But why are warblers called warblers? Well, the name originated in Europe probably in the 1600's, with the name being used in North America by the end of the 1700's.

Many Eurasian warblers have fairly long complicated songs, with several species being renowned songsters. The Eurasian Blackcap has a classic warbling song which is distressingly similar that of the Garden Warbler; the latter being a classic “LBJ” with no distinguishing field marks at all. Willow Warblers have a gently undulating song which may be described as “warbling” and Sedge, Marsh and Reed Warblers have chattering, repetitive songs which again, could be described as “warbling”- well, maybe. Whitethroats, Lesser Whitethroats and other members of the genus “Sylvia” have songs which I would describe as “scratchy warbles”, so the use of the name warbler for Eurasian species is pretty accurate.



Marsh Warbler by S. Thompson

Now we cross the Atlantic. When the English settlers landed in the New World they gave birds they came across similar names to those from Europe, so we have robins, buzzards and yes, warblers. While North American warblers are certainly brightly colored and lovely to look at, their songs could never be described as warbles, aside from the somewhat random chattering song of the Canada Warbler. Black-and-white Warblers have a very lisping song; Ovenbirds and Kentucky Warblers sing a strident, if simple, selection of phrases; Cape May Warblers have a somewhat random, high-pitched song that sounds as if they are still practicing, and Blue-wings – well, it's barely even a song.

As for the identification challenges between the 2 groups of birds, they couldn't be more different. Many Eurasian warblers are feathered in muted shades of olive, brown, yellow and

green and the key to identification is often their song and habitat. On the other hand, identifying a North American warbler is very easy- even during the fall. There may be a slight challenge with a couple of species, but the vast majority don't fall into the "confusing fall" category at all.

So, I have one more walk around the local patch before I head back stateside. There are 5 species already on territory in the small area of woodland and there may be one more on the way – the late-arriving Garden Warbler. When I return to North Carolina, I will miss the lovely descending song of the Willow Warbler, and the rich warbling of the Blackcap, but any day now, I will see my first Blackburnian and Canada Warblers of the spring. I will hear my first Ovenbird in the forests near my house, and I hope that the few Cerulean Warblers in the Blue Ridge will make it back again from South America.

We can't have everything. North American warblers are blessed with good looks but don't have fine voices, and the Europeans look like nothing at all, but boy, can they sing. I am on my way!

Simon Thompson



Am. Redstart by A. Lenk