

Photographing Migrant Warblers

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Migrant warblers are among the most difficult avian subjects to photograph. They hide in the leaves, often in dark shadows, and flit about in the tops of tall trees. These very small birds rarely sit still for more than a second or two, chasing insects frantically. Five seconds with a cooperative individual, posing in the open, is a relative eternity in warbler photography.

MIGRATION

Of course, all of the above assumes that there are actually warblers present to photograph. Warblers migrate north through the continental United States from roughly late March through early June. They arrive further north as the season progresses, reaching the northern tier of states by early to mid-May. Later in May and into the first week of June, migrant warblers consist mainly of the less vividly marked females.

Warbler photographers sometimes overlook fall migration, which takes place during September and October, but it can be very productive. In some years I have had more success with warblers in the fall than in the spring. Many of the birds will have less vibrant plumage, occasionally making species identification difficult. However, some warblers consume ripening berries during fall migration, and it is much easier to photograph a warbler sitting in a low bush eating berries than one chasing insects through the tops of trees! Checking local birding resources such as books, rare bird alerts, discussion forums, and birding groups is a good way to pinpoint the timing of warbler migration in the area you wish to photograph.

CONDITIONS

Weather plays a key role in the success of any warbler photographer. Dry, still and warm conditions generally result in the birds being in the tops of large trees, where they are pretty much impossible to photograph. Storms and strong winds can be a blessing in disguise for photographic opportunities, although tough on the migrants. Overnight storms can cause fallouts and dawn finds the birds low to the ground, exhausted and hungry, and thus much easier to photograph. Strong winds will typically cause the warblers to stay lower but the movement of leaves and branches may make it challenging to find the birds in the viewfinder. In these conditions it is best to work the leeward side of the woods as the birds like to get out of the wind; this makes for much improved photographic conditions.

LOCATIONS

Where can a photographer go to photograph these beautiful migrant warblers? My favorite location is Magee Marsh, near Toledo, Ohio. Other well-known warbler hot spots include Point Pelee in Ontario, Canada, Central Park in New York City, and various locations along the Gulf coast, from Texas to Florida. Any city park can be an oasis among the concrete jungles. The Gulf coast locations represent the first available land the birds have seen after flying hundreds of miles across the Gulf of Mexico. On very active days most any woodlot will do; I have even had some success photographing warblers in my own back yard. Local birding groups may be able to help you locate a migrant trap near you.

EQUIPMENT

Photographing these small birds requires a long telephoto lens on a sturdy tripod, a teleconverter, and possibly an extension tube. Flash brackets in combination with a flash cord allow use of the flash off-camera above the lens. The brackets allow the flash to stay upright even when I rotate the lens in the collar to shoot vertically, and elevating the flash above the lens axis also reduces steel eye (similar to red eye) in warblers and other songbirds. A Visual Echoes "Better Beamer" flash extender, which holds a plastic fresnel lens in front of the flash head, helps a great deal to increase the flash output. A Quantum external flash battery reduces flash recycle times.

Some photographers have been successful in hand holding a 400mm f/5.6 lens attached to a digital camera body with flash. This setup offers greater maneuverability when the warblers are close in and flitting through thicker vegetation. It is also a viable alternative when working in crowded situations, such as confinement to a boardwalk and/or surrounded by hundreds of birders at one of the well-known warbler hot spots.



TECHNIQUE

My favorite technique for photographing warblers involves heading to my local migrant trap during the appropriate season. I first work the edge of the woods from the east, which puts the morning sun behind me, watching for any movement in the trees. Once a bird is detected, I position my tripod and try to anticipate the bird's next move.

If the bird is right in front of me, I will try to place it in the viewfinder – often easier said than done – and follow the bird's movements using manual focus. As soon as it appears in an opening I auto focus and take the photo. If the bird happens to pause in the opening for any length of time after that initial shot, I take the opportunity to fine-tune my composition and exposure.

With a bird small in the frame I try to use the compositional “rule of thirds,” although feel in a pinch it is far better to shoot the bird in the center of the frame and crop later than it is to miss the shot completely. If the warbler is fairly large in the frame, I like the composition created by placing the center auto focus sensor on the eye. A very close bird requires more depth of field to get the entire bird sharp and careful control to avoid inadvertently clipping off the feet or the tip of the tail in the frame.

With warblers I find it's best to have as much shutter speed available as possible. I have never taken a warbler photograph at less than 1/60th of a second due to concerns about subject movement and rarely stop down from wide open. In low ambient light requiring slower shutter speeds I use flash as main light to illuminate the bird. I simply select the widest aperture, set the shutter speed to 1/60th or 1/80th of a second and set the flash compensation to $-1/3$ for most birds; to zero for darker warblers that lack extensive highlights. However, I much prefer photographing warblers using flash as fill rather than with flash as main light as the images will look much more natural. When the ambient lighting allows shutter speeds of 1/60th of a second or faster, the flash at -1 to -3 stop, based on personal preference and equipment, can serve as “fill flash.” The effect is more subtle and provides a catch light in the eye plus eliminates stray shadows.

Trying to capture these little birds wherever they might perch also creates exposure challenges due to greatly varying backgrounds. I find I must constantly keep an eye on the exposure and compensate when backgrounds are either bright or dark. Setting proper exposure for the bird manually is an option, which would maintain those settings regardless of the background.

Some photographers have had great success using a water drip to attract migrant warblers. I have tried this technique only once with no success. It is my belief that the abundance of fresh water in my area limits the productivity of a drip. Photographers in drier climates or those working along the Gulf coast may want to explore this possibility. A drip essentially consists of a fresh water puddle, which is a shallow, dug out hole lined with plastic and filled with water. The drip can be as simple as a plastic jug suspended over the puddle with a small hole punched in the bottom. Passing migrant warblers may be drawn to the sound of the trickling water and use the puddle for bathing and drinking. An attractive perch near the puddle allows an area for the birds to stage and offers the good photo opportunities.



Considering all the difficulties, why would anyone want to photograph warblers? They are beautiful birds with incredibly vibrant colors and in spring the woods are alive with song. There is also some incredible variety among warblers. On a good activity day it is not unusual to see 20 species of warblers, and a dedicated birder or photographer could see 30 species in a single spring season. It only takes one really great opportunity, or one great image captured, to keep you coming back for more. Be sure to make time this spring to head out to your favorite local woodland or visit one of the well-known migrant warbler hot spots. You, too, just might become addicted to trying to capture photos of these tiny but magnificent birds.



Brian L. Zwiebel is a nature and wildlife photographer specializing in birds. Warblers are among his favorite photographic subjects and he is fortunate enough to live a short drive from Magee Marsh Wildlife Area in Ohio, one of North America's top migrant traps. For more information on photographing birds at Magee Marsh, please see Brian's [Photographer's Perspective On Location guide to Magee Marsh](#).

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