



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Mourning Warbler *Geothlypis philadelphia*

State Status: **Special Concern**
Federal Status: **None**

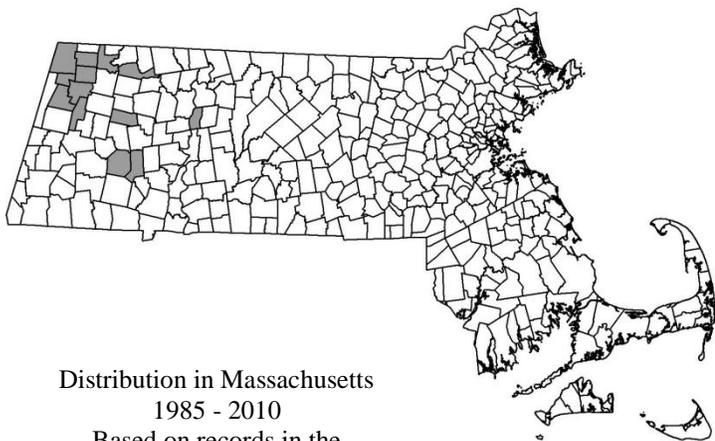
DESCRIPTION: A rather secretive species, the Mourning Warbler is often difficult to observe, except when the male is singing from a perch. The back, wings, and tail are olive green, while the underside is mostly bright yellow, grading to yellow-olive on the sides. The head and throat are gray, forming a bib on the upper chest. The lower edge of the bib grades to black in males. Legs are flesh-colored to pinkish. This combination of features sets it apart from all other genera of wood warbler. The Mourning Warbler is a relatively small warbler, with an overall length of 5.25 inches and a wing span of 7.5 inches. Its song is repetitive and rhythmic with a rich, burry quality. The first part of the song is a single syllable repeated 3 to 7 times, followed by a lower syllable often repeated twice. The entire song is described as “churry, churry, churry, churry, chorry, chorry”. A special flight song is also given during the latter part of the nesting period, beginning with a series of chip notes as the male flies upward into the sky.



*Mourning Warbler showing the black bib above the bright yellow underside.
Photo by and courtesy of Terry Wright.*

SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS: The Connecticut Warbler, which is of the same genus, is similar in appearance, but has a complete white eye ring, lacks black coloration at the bottom of its gray bib, and is not known to breed in New England. The Common Yellowthroat lacks a gray bib altogether, having a yellow throat instead.

RANGE: The Mourning Warbler breeds from British Columbia to Labrador, into the Great Lakes region and east to northern New England, and south along the Appalachian Mountains into West Virginia. In Massachusetts, it has been observed in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties, with most observations occurring in northern Berkshire County.



Distribution in Massachusetts
1985 - 2010
Based on records in the
Natural Heritage Database

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

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Mourning Warblers overwinter in southern Central America (Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama) and northern South America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela), preferring humid habitats. The species occasionally overwinters in the Dominican Republic.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: Mourning Warblers prefer to breed in clearings associated with disturbed woodlands and second-growth forests. In Massachusetts, most breeding individuals are observed in regenerating clear-cuts or other forest openings less than ten years old. Breeding sites typically occur in northern hardwood forest communities, sometimes with a spruce and/or fir component. At many such sites, there is a dense undergrowth of raspberries (*Rubus* spp.) or ferns. Most breeding sites are at higher elevations (e.g., Mount Greylock) and are somewhat sloped. Given its affinity for clearings created by logging and fire, Mourning Warbler is presumed to be one of several neotropical migrants that actually benefitted from human settlement.

LIFECYCLE/BEHAVIOR: Mourning Warblers typically arrive on their breeding grounds in the northeastern U.S. in mid to late May. Courtship and nesting follow soon after arrival. Nests are generally built on or close to the ground within dense cover, usually in brambles, clumps of weeds, grass tussocks, or tangles of low shrubs. The outer part of the nest is woven of dry leaves, grasses, sedges, vine stalks, and other materials.

The inner cup is typically lined with finer materials such as roots, hair, and finer sedges and grasses. Eggs are cream-colored and speckled with brown to black spots concentrated near the rounder end of the egg. Clutch size is 3–5 eggs, commonly 4; nests are sometimes parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*). Incubation lasts about 12 days, and is performed solely by the female. The young leave the nest 8-9 days after hatching but are not capable of sustained flight for another week or two. The young are attended closely by their parents and generally remain on territory for approximately 3 weeks after leaving the nest. Diet consists of a variety of insects including caterpillars, spiders, and beetles.

POPULATION STATUS: Mourning Warblers appeared to be increasing in abundance in Massachusetts as late as the 1950's, and data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) suggest that the species was increasing in abundance range-wide during the 1960s and 1970s. However, more recent BBS data indicates that Mourning Warblers have been declining range-wide since the 1980s, at an annual rate of 2.7% from 1980 to 2006; that decline appears to have been more pronounced in Canada (3.3%) than in the United States (0.8%). Populations of a number of wildlife species dependent on early successional habitats have been declining in New England during the past 50 years or more, likely the result of a declining rate of major forest disturbance, a simultaneous increase in the rate of forest re-growth and succession, and a steady increase in permanent loss of forest habitat to development. Data are too scant to estimate population trends of Mourning Warblers in Massachusetts, but the species appears to have been consistently rare and restricted in its distribution since at least 1975.

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: Given that the core range of the Mourning Warbler is in boreal forests of the northern United States and Canada, and that its distribution in Massachusetts is largely restricted to higher elevations, long-term persistence of breeding populations of the species in Massachusetts may be seriously challenged by climate change and its effects on forest-community structure. However, until those effects and their implications are better understood, certain activities that create forest openings in Massachusetts may improve habitat for Mourning Warblers and should be encouraged in the near-term. Mourning Warblers appear to benefit from some forms of logging (including clear-cutting), especially those that result in dense growths of brambles and ferns. Active management of habitat in Massachusetts should be concentrated at higher elevations in the northwestern part of the state, wherever spruce and fir are significant components of the forest community. At minimum, canopy cover should probably be reduced to 50% or less within the treatment area. Although the typical territory of a Mourning Warbler is only 1-2 acres in size, treatments of 10 acres or more are preferable. Cuttings should have irregular edges when possible, especially if treatment occurs near human habitation or other areas where mammalian nest predators such as raccoons and opossums are abundant.

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