

Black-and-White Warbler

Mniotilta varia

One of the earliest-arriving migrant warblers, the Black-and-white Warbler's thin, squeaky song is one of the first signs that spring birding has sprung. This crisply striped bundle of black and white feathers creeps along tree trunks and branches like a nimble nuthatch, probing the bark for insects with its slightly downcurved bill. Though you typically see these birds only in trees, they build their little cup-shaped nests in the leaf litter of forests across central and eastern North America.

Keys to Identification

Size & Shape

Black-and-white Warblers are medium-sized warblers (small songbirds). They have a fairly long, slightly downcurved bill. The head often appears somewhat flat and streamlined, with a short neck. The wings are long and the tail is short.

Color Pattern

These birds are boldly striped in black and white. Their black wings are highlighted by two wide, white wing bars. Adult males have more obvious black streaking, particularly on the underparts and the cheek. Females (especially immatures) are paler, with less streaking and usually a wash of buff on the flanks. The undertail coverts have distinctive large black spots bordering the cheek. The lower belly is white.

Behavior

Black-and-white Warblers act more like nuthatches than warblers, foraging for hidden insects in the bark of trees by creeping up, down, and around branches and trunks. Despite their arboreal foraging habits, they nest on the ground at the bases of trees.

Habitat

Deciduous forest and mixed forest are the preferred summer habitats of Black-and-white Warblers, usually with trees of mixed ages that provide a variety of foraging substrates. On migration, look for them in any forest or woodlot. They winter in forests and forest edges from Florida to Colombia.

Cool Facts

- Black-and-white Warblers have an extra-long hind claw and heavier legs than other wood-warblers, which help them hold onto and move around on bark.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 4.3 - 5.1 inches
- Wingspan - 7.1 - 8.7 inches
- Weight - 0.3 - 0.5 ounces

