



Field Guides Tour Report

VIRGINIAS' WARBLERS 2015

May 27, 2015 to May 31, 2015

John Rowlett, Tom Johnson, and Jan Pierson

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



This vista from Bear Mountain looking into Highland County, Virginia is emblematic of the rolling ridge and valley topography that we repeatedly traversed during the tour. Photo by guide Tom Johnson.

What better way to spend five days in late spring than a journey through warbler heaven in the forested mountains and open valleys of Virginia and West Virginia? John Rowlett, Jan Pierson, and I were pleased to lead an intrepid and fun group through the region, and we delighted in the visual and aural splendor that is an eastern forest (really, several different types of forest, in this case!) in spring.

We began our journey in Charlottesville, and headed south to the James River for a bit of a riverine forest warmup. Here, along the banks of the James at Warren Ferry and the Hardware River WMA, such lowland, southern species as Prothonotary Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Orchard Oriole, and Blue Grosbeak graced us with appearances. The birding didn't stop for dinner, either - a Louisiana Waterthrush arrived in a small stream next to our restaurant and sang from mere feet away as we dined.

The next morning, we headed up onto the Blue Ridge, birding south from Afton Mountain to Humpback Rocks along the Blue Ridge Parkway. The density of Cerulean Warblers here was truly amazing, and we quickly picked up a large diversity of forest breeders, from Scarlet Tanagers and Pileated Woodpeckers to Kentucky Warblers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Abbie Rowlett helped us tremendously by preparing a wonderful picnic breakfast (a hot breakfast served in the field - wow!) and lunch. In the afternoon, we drove west across the Shenandoah Valley to the small town of Monterey, our base for the rest of the tour.

From Monterey, short drives took us to the Blue Grass Valley, an amazingly beautiful landscape of pasture and agricultural fields - and even better, a great background on which to see Red-headed Woodpeckers, Bobolinks, Eastern Screech-Owl, and even an albino Woodchuck!

The main warblering for this stretch of the tour took place over the state line in West Virginia. We started our mornings with picnics at Old House Run in the Monongahela National Forest, against a chorus of Louisiana Waterthrushes, Blackburnian Warblers, Least Flycatchers (we even found their nest, high in a hemlock!), and much more. Another exploration featured a high elevation conifer-enclosed wetland at Blister Swamp, home to Northern Waterthrushes, Canada Warblers, Swainson's Thrushes, and even those surprise Red Crossbills that flew in. This site truly felt like a forest 500 miles to the north (it's amazing what a little elevation change will do to an avifauna!). We also ventured through a long stretch of road from the Science Camp through the Little River Loop - it felt like total wilderness as we soaked in the Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Winter Wrens, Acadian Flycatchers, and Mourning Warblers. Even though it rained a bit during this stretch of the tour, we managed to fit in good chunks of birding in between the raindrops.

Our final morning began with a picnic breakfast at a friend's home, right along the West Virginia - Virginia state line at Bramble Hill. Though the cheese and fruit selection was wonderful, the birds were even better - we found singing male Golden-winged Warblers here, and even saw a calling Black-billed Cuckoo!

This was likely John's last time running this tour - as his co-leader, I have to say how impressed I was with the route, the picnic planning, and John's intimate knowledge of the Blue Ridge, Highland County, and adjacent areas of West Virginia - truly inspiring. Jan Pierson came along to drive one of our vans, but ended up serving as a tremendous third guide - his uncanny ability to find birds in dense vegetation based on tiny variations in vocalizations was truly impressive, and we all benefited greatly from his presence. Special appreciation is due to John and Nancy Spahr for welcoming us to their home in the Blue Grass Valley for dinner (and some owling), and to Margaret and Wayne for having us over for breakfast and some warblers at Bramble Hill. Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who joined us on this short but action-packed adventure - I trust you had a good time with the fine diversity of birds we encountered, and I certainly hope to see you on another tour in the future.

Good birding, and safe travels!

Tom Johnson

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – Common; seen every day.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Common.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – A female that flew over near the James River on our first day was a real surprise. Though there is suitable breeding habitat, the species is rare here at this season.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*) – Two that flew over our dinner at the Spahr home in the Blue Grass Valley represented a new "yard bird" for the Spahrs. Fun!

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*) – Common at lower elevations.

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – Common throughout.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*) – One flew over calling at Old House Run during breakfast. The species requires fairly secluded, forested locations for breeding, and this individual was clearly territorial.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – A few immatures were loafing with vultures, attending a mammal carcass in the Blue Grass Valley.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (*Buteo lineatus*) – We had comparisons between an adult Red-shouldered Hawk and a Red-tailed Hawk at the Hardware River WMA on our first afternoon.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK (*Buteo platypterus*) – Several were in the mountain forests along the VA/ WV border. These small buteos will gather in massive flocks to migrate southward toward Central and South America in the fall.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – We saw several in the lower elevation parts of the tour near Charlottesville.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – A few were in Monterey and the Blue Grass Valley.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Common in towns.

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – Common.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO (*Coccyzus americanus*) – Rather common; we heard this species every day, and even saw it a few times.

BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) – One was on the West Virginia side of the state line at Bramble Hill. We heard it calling and had good views at the shrubby edge of a field.

Strigidae (Owls)

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL (*Megascops asio*) – During our visit to the Spahr home in the Blue Grass Valley, we had a dusk opportunity to look for screech-owls after our catered dinner and a nice rainstorm. John Spahr called in one of his local screech-owls and we had nice views overhead in the backyard.

Apodidae (Swifts)

CHIMNEY SWIFT (*Chaetura pelagica*) – Common in towns; especially nice views over the inn in Monterey.

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD (*Archilochus colubris*) – We ran into a few, including in the Spahr's backyard.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – Several flew by rattling at various water stops on the trip, including the James River and streams near the WV/ VA state line.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) – Wonderful views in the Blue Grass Valley. This declining species is still relatively common in this area, and we found a few pairs working fencelines, utility poles, and isolated clumps of trees.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – Common, especially at lower elevations. We did have nice comparisons with Red-headed Woodpecker at a wooded edge in the Blue Grass Valley.

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*) – One was drumming along FR 14 above the Science Camp in West Virginia. We tracked it down for views, and this great distraction also led us to also find Ovenbird and Hermit Thrush.

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – Common; seen on several occasions - the smallest black-and-white woodpecker here.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – We heard these birds' loud, sharp "PEEK!" notes on the last two days during forays into deciduous forest, but never saw them well.

NORTHERN FLICKER (YELLOW-SHAFTED) (*Colaptes auratus auratus*) – Common; good views through the scope in the Blue Grass Valley.
PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – We had some close views at our breakfast and lunch spot along the Blue Ridge Parkway near Humpback Rocks.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – A few were along roadsides in the Blue Grass Valley.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus virens*) – Common; excellent views at the Hardware River and Humpback Rocks.

ACADIAN FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax virens*) – We found a close singing bird along FR 14 near Science Camp. Great views in the scope!

ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax alnorum*) – One posed in the open along the Little River Loop off FR 14 in West Virginia. "Freebeer!"

WILLOW FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax traillii*) – Lovely scope views along the Greenbrier River at the intersection of Routes 250 and 92 in West Virginia. We could even see the bird's duller gray-brown upperparts and lack of a noticeable eye-ring, in contrast to the greener, eye-ringed Alder Flycatchers at higher elevation. "Fitz-bew!"

LEAST FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax minimus*) – After hearing but not seeing these little Empids calling at our breakfast spot at Old House Run on the first morning in West Virginia, it was rather gratifying to find a pair building a nest in a hemlock tree on our second visit. We had nice scope views of the action.

EASTERN PHOEBE (*Sayornis phoebe*) – Common; seen every day.

GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus crinitus*) – Common; seen most days. This is the large, colorful (yellow and rust) flycatcher of eastern forests.

EASTERN KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) – Common; seen most days, especially along fence lines in open edges.

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

WHITE-EYED VIREO (*Vireo griseus*) – We heard these sneaky vireos along the Hardware and James Rivers, but we didn't see them. [*]

YELLOW-THROATED VIREO (*Vireo flavifrons*) – Good views at Hardware River WMA, and we heard them along the Blue Ridge Parkway too.

BLUE-HEADED VIREO (*Vireo solitarius*) – We had brief but repeated views at Blister Swamp in West Virginia.

WARBLING VIREO (*Vireo gilvus*) – We heard this species singing at Warren Ferry on our first afternoon [*]

RED-EYED VIREO (*Vireo olivaceus*) – Very common in the forests; seen every day. We were rarely out of earshot of this omnipresent species.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Common and widespread.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Common.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Several very nice views in Highland County, Virginia and in West Virginia too.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – Good views along waterways on most days.

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Fairly common - we saw them at the Hardware River WMA, Blue Grass Valley, and Bramble Hill.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Common, especially in the Blue Grass Valley.

CLIFF SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) – One circled over us in the Blue Grass Valley, where the species is uncommon.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

CAROLINA CHICKADEE (*Poecile carolinensis*) – We found this lowland, southern chickadee at Warren Ferry and the Hardware River WMA on our first day.

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – Common at higher elevations in Virginia and West Virginia, where it replaces Carolina Chickadee. We found them in West Virginia and Bear Mountain in Virginia.

TUFTED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – Common - ours were along the James River and the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – Our best views were at a nest cavity that John spotted at Blister Swamp in WV.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*) – Nice views along the Blue Ridge Parkway at Humpback Rocks; we heard another at Science Camp in WV.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – One sang at the Science Camp in WV. [*]

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*) – We heard these bubbly wrens at Bramble Hill. [*]

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes hiemalis*) – After quite a bit of adjusting, we finally got the scopes locked on to a singing Winter Wren just uphill from the Science Camp. This amazing songster delighted everyone with its complex tunes.

CAROLINA WREN (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Their rollicking, loud songs and ratchety calls were common sounds during our explorations in the woods and brushy edges, but we didn't see one on this trip. [*]

Poliophtidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila caerulea*) – Our best views came from our journey along the James River on the first afternoon.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – Several were calling at our Alder Flycatcher stop on the Little River Loop.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EASTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia sialis*) – We had some nice views of nesting birds at Bramble Hill.

VEERY (*Catharus fuscescens*) – Singing at a few spots; one posed for us a few times at the Science Camp.

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – A calling bird appeared for us along the road at Blister Swamp, allowing us to admire its buff spectacles.

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*) – One was gathering food near a nest along FR 14 above the Science Camp in WV.

WOOD THRUSH (*Hylocichla mustelina*) – We found many at Humpback Rocks, where we had nice views. Another was at Bramble Hill on our last morning.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Abundant.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

GRAY CATBIRD (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – Very common.

BROWN THRASHER (*Toxostoma rufum*) – We only saw a few of these furtive birds - our views were at Hardware River WMA and Bramble Hill.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Common in the lower elevation areas near Charlottesville and in the Shenandoah Valley on the first two days of the tour.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Common near towns and farms.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

CEDAR WAXWING (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) – Quite common - we saw them at many sites, including at Old House Run during two breakfast birding stops.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

OVENBIRD (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) – This is one of the loudest and most common warblers in the forest here, but we waited until our woodland exploration above Science Camp to actually lay eyes upon one as it sang and walked along branches.

WORM-EATING WARBLER (*Helmitheros vermivorum*) – It took quite a bit of searching, but we finally tracked one down as it sang its dry trill downslope from the Blue Ridge Parkway.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia motacilla*) – One interrupted our first dinner in Scottsville, VA in the stream next to our restaurant tables. Another sang and gave us great looks at Old House Run in WV.

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) – While we heard them well in boreal habitat at Blister Swamp in WV, our views were quite brief. This is near the southern edge of the breeding range of the species.

GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) – Delightful views of two singing males at Bramble Hill capped off the last morning of the tour. We even saw them on both sides of the West Virginia/ Virginia state line!

BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER (*Mniotilta varia*) – Common; we encountered this warbler on every day in several different forested habitats.

PROTHONOTARY WARBLER (*Protonotaria citrea*) – We found one at Hardware River WMA on our first afternoon. This bird was not the most cooperative individual; while we did have some views, it was super active and was tough to focus on as it danced around the riverbank.

MOURNING WARBLER (*Geothlypis philadelphia*) – A pair delighted us along a road cut near Durbin; another singing male showed nicely at the Science Camp.

KENTUCKY WARBLER (*Geothlypis formosa*) – At a pulloff along the Blue Ridge Parkway, we heard one singing insistently, but had a very tough time locking on to the bird until Steve spotted it, belting away from a shaded song perch. Then we were able to put the bird in our scopes and had wonderful views.

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Common; great views at Bramble Hill among other spots.

HOODED WARBLER (*Setophaga citrina*) – Beautiful looks at a singing male along the wooded slopes below the Blue Ridge Parkway.

AMERICAN REDSTART (*Setophaga ruticilla*) – One of the most abundant warblers in the area.

CERULEAN WARBLER (*Setophaga cerulea*) – In the canopy of deciduous woods on the Blue Ridge, the density of this species is truly remarkable - they were singing their spritely, buzzy songs everywhere! During our morning there, we had some exceptionally nice looks, finding about a dozen of these blue gems (all males that we saw).

NORTHERN PARULA (*Setophaga americana*) – The best views were in the scope at Warren Ferry on our first day. "ZZZZZZZZZZZZ-up!"

MAGNOLIA WARBLER (*Setophaga magnolia*) – The bird that battled with a Blackburnian Warbler at Old House Run was hard to beat! Amazing looks at this flying multitude of field marks.

BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER (*Setophaga fusca*) – Birds at Old House Run and Blister Swamp came through and put on a lovely show for us. It's hard to beat a flame-throated Blackburnian!

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – Common, though tough to see. We found one singing out in the open at the Willow Flycatcher spot along the Greenbrier River, and also found another attending a nest.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER (*Setophaga pensylvanica*) – Sweet views of a singing male near Humpback Rocks on the Blue Ridge Parkway highlighted our experiences with this species.

PINE WARBLER (*Setophaga pinus*) – One was singing along the road to Hardware River WMA; we had slightly better luck seeing another singing male in pines along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – This was a reasonably common bird in the cool, mountain forests at Blister Swamp and surrounding environs in WV.

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (WHITE-LORED) (*Setophaga dominica albilora*) – The two that we saw at Warren Ferry were some of the first warblers of our tour! These are representatives of the white-lored subspecies albilora that has a great fondness for riverside sycamores.

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Setophaga discolor*) – Great views on the entrance road to the Hardware River WMA.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER (*Setophaga virens*) – Common in higher elevation forests - we saw one very well at Blister Swamp in WV and another on Bear Mountain in VA.

CANADA WARBLER (*Cardellina canadensis*) – Super looks at a singing male at Blister Swamp, WV - when it would pop out of the rhododendron, that is!

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT (*Icteria virens*) – We heard one of these sneaky rascals in a regenerating clearcut section of forest near Hardware River WMA. [*]

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

EASTERN TOWHEE (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) – Common - we found them every day.

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*) – Another bird found every day of this tour. Very common here.

FIELD SPARROW (*Spizella pusilla*) – While we heard one singing in the Blue Grass Valley on our first day there, our best views of this little clown-sparrow were at Blister Swamp and then again at Bramble Hill.

VESPER SPARROW (*Pooecetes gramineus*) – At least two of these effervescent sparrows were singing up a storm atop Bear Mountain, the wonderful vista that gave us some amazing perspective on the topography of the region.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – Common in the Blue Grass Valley.

SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*) – Common.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (SLATE-COLORED) (*Junco hyemalis carolinensis*) – One was along the Blue Grass Parkway; others were at higher elevation at sites like Blister Swamp.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

SUMMER TANAGER (*Piranga rubra*) – We found a handsome individual on our first afternoon at the confluence of the Hardware and James Rivers.

SCARLET TANAGER (*Piranga olivacea*) – Common in all deciduous forests we visited; good views at Humpback Rocks on Blue Ridge Parkway.

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – Common in the lowlands near Charlottesville and the James River.

ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) – We found these chunky songsters along the Blue Ridge Parkway and in the mountains west of Monterey.

BLUE GROSBEAK (*Passerina caerulea*) – A pair was near the parking lot at Hardware River WMA. The male was singing and the female twitched her tail anxiously.

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – Common.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

BOBOLINK (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) – These lovely blackbirds were singing up a storm in hayfield and pastures in the Blue Grass Valley.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – Common.

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*) – These were singing at several locations in the Blue Grass Valley.

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – Very common.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*) – Common.

ORCHARD ORIOLE (*Icterus spurius*) – These slim orioles were singing down along the James River on our first afternoon; we even had some nice scope views of one in the top of a sycamore.

BALTIMORE ORIOLE (*Icterus galbula*) – We found these striking black-and-orange orioles along the James River, in the Blue Grass Valley, and at our Willow Flycatcher site in West Virginia.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Perhaps a testament to the amount of time we spent in wild places on this tour, we only found this species on one day - in the Blue Grass Valley.

PURPLE FINCH (*Haemorhous purpureus*) – These stocky finches sang their bubbly songs at Blister Swamp and the Science Camp in West Virginia.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – About six of these rare finches were at Blister Swamp in West Virginia. After a small flock flew over giving their distinctive "kip" calls, playback drew a male to the top of a roadside spruce, and we watched him in the scope for a few minutes.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*) – Common.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Common in towns and near farms.

MAMMALS

EASTERN COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) – Common.

PLAIN EASTERN CHIPMUNK (*Tamias striatus*) – Common in the forest.

WOODCHUCK (*Marmota monax*) – This includes a striking white individual (probably an albino!) in the Blue Grass Valley.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Common.

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – At higher elevations in areas with conifers (Science Camp, Blister Swamp).

BOBCAT (*Lynx rufus*) – Wow! We saw this stunning cat walking nonchalantly away from the van during our Black-throated Blue Warbler expedition on Jack Mountain.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – A few showed through the tour, mostly in the early mornings as we drove through mixed forest with small clearings.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Other taxa:

River Cooter

Red-spotted Newt (Red Eft)

American Toad

unidentified small rodent

Totals for the tour: 120 bird taxa and 7 mammal taxa