

Palm Warbler

Dendroica palmarum

The Palm Warbler was discovered on the island of Santo Domingo in 1788, and early ornithologist thought it was a permanent resident of that and other islands in the Caribbean. It wasn't until many years later that it was recognized as a nesting species in Canada and the northern United States.

"Palm" warbler is actually a misnomer because this species shows no inclination to use palms. The presence of palm trees on the islands probably accounted for the inappropriate common name.

Palm Warblers are unusual among warblers in the *Dendroica* genus because they nest on the ground. They prefer open areas in moist bogs or on dry plains of pines with clearings or low ground cover.

They are hardy little birds and are among the first to arrive on their breeding grounds, long before the last winter blasts have ended. They arrive in northern New England in early April and nesting is under way in May, often when temperatures are near freezing on many mornings.

They are also among the last to leave their breeding grounds, arriving in Corkscrew in early October and staying until early to mid April.

There are two subspecies of Palm Warblers: the Yellow Palm Warbler (*D. p. hypochrysea*) and the Western Palm Warbler (*D. p. palmarum*).

The subspecies that breeds in Maine is the Yellow Palm. Since its fall migration takes it south along the Atlantic coast, it would be the one expected to be found in Florida. But that is not the case. For some unexplainable reason, the Yellow Palms veer westward as they reach northern Florida and spend the winter along the northern Gulf Coast.



Western birds (*D. p. palmarum*) are lightly streaked and drabber in color; the upper breast and throat are bright yellow but the lower breast and belly are a dull yellow mixed with grayish-white. Adults in breeding plumage have rufous crowns and yellow throats.

Both subspecies are streaked on the sides of the throat and across the breast

and on the sides, and both races have yellow undertail coverts. Sexes appear similar.

Within the genus *Dendroica*, Palm Warblers are most closely related to the Prairie and Pine Warblers and are most often confused with Yellow-rumped Warblers. Yellow-rumps have the bright yellow on the rump (top) of the tail while Palms have the yellow on the undertail coverts (bottom) of the tail.

Distinguishing behaviors to identify the Palm are that it commonly walks on the ground and it is constantly bobbing its tail.

During the fall and winter, Palm Warblers feast on seeds, insects, and berries, including Wax Myrtle, in addition to feeding on nectar from a variety of plants including sea grapes.

The song of the Palm Warbler is a monotonous buzzy trill, most often heard during breeding season. The call is a sharp *chek*.

Of those that were tracked, the longest living wild Palm Warbler reached the age of about six and a half years.

A Palm by any other name would be...

French: Paruline à couronne rouse

German: Palmenwaldsänger

Spanish: Reinita palmera

Earlier English common names:

Little Yellow Wagtail, Redpoll Warbler



Just as unexplainable is the fact that the western form crosses the United States and spends the winter in Florida, Cuba, and the West Indies where they are the most commonly seen warbler next to the Yellow-rumped Warbler.

The two subspecies of Palm Warblers are easily identifiable in the field.

Both subspecies of Palm Warblers are mostly brownish birds, with distinctive, yellow undertail coverts. They have small white corners on their tails that are visible in flight.

The eastern birds (*D. p. palmarum*) are entirely bright yellow on the underparts with rufous streaks on their breasts.