



## Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*)

**Common Name**  
Golden-winged Warbler

**Scientific Name**  
*Vermivora chrysoptera*

**Status**  
*Partners in Flight* lists the golden-winged warbler as a high priority species of concern.



(Photo courtesy of Bob & Peter Wood)

**West Virginia Status**  
The golden-winged warbler is a relatively uncommon species in West Virginia. The Breeding Bird Atlas Project reported it from 40 counties within the state usually in small scattered patches of suitable habitat.

**Description**  
The golden-winged warbler is a small neotropical migrant warbler 9.5 - 11.5 cm (4 - 4.5 inches) in length. It has a slate gray back, wings, and tail and a white to light gray underside with a bright yellow forehead and wing patch. This species has a distinct black facial pattern similar to that of the chickadees. The feet and legs of this bird are dark brown and the bill is relatively long and sharply pointed. The golden-winged warbler's bill color changes seasonally from black in the spring to pale brown in

the fall. There is little seasonal variation in plumage and also little difference between the plumage of the males and females.

**Range**  
The breeding range of the golden-winged warbler extends from southern Manitoba east across much of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, southern Ontario and Quebec to New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Its range then extends southward along the Appalachian Mountains through Pennsylvania, western Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and into northern Georgia. The golden-winged warbler breeds in the middle to higher elevations of the central, southern, and eastern portions of West Virginia, but it is absent from the western lowland portions of the state and rare in the Eastern Panhandle. The wintering range for the golden-winged warbler extends from southern Mexico south through Central America to the northern portions of South America.

**Habitat**  
The golden-winged warbler requires brushy early successional habitat. It prefers to nest in areas such as power line rights-of-way, shrubby fields, abandoned strip mines, alder swamps, beaver created wetlands, and abandoned orchards.

**Diet**  
Insects comprise the majority of this species' diet. Some of the food items taken include spiders, caterpillars, moths and their larvae, and a variety of flying insects. The golden-winged warbler forages by gleaning insects from twigs and dead leaves, often hanging upside down much like a chickadee.

**Life History**  
In early April the golden-winged warbler leaves its wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America and begins its migration north. It generally arrives in West Virginia during the last week of April. The female builds a small cup-shaped nest from dead leaves, grasses, and tree bark. The nest is located on or just above the ground and is generally concealed



by clumps of grass or located at the base of a tree. Four to five white eggs with brown blotches are laid and incubated by the female for 10-11 days. Both the male and the female golden-wings care for the young after hatching, and the young usually fledge within 10 days. Both parents may care for the young birds for up to a month after fledging. Most golden-winged warblers have left West Virginia by the end of August to migrate back to their wintering grounds.

### **Threats and Prospects**

The golden-winged warbler faces two major threats in West Virginia and throughout much of its range. First, because this species requires such a specific habitat, the early successional stages of plant growth, optimal habitat tends to be widely scattered and in small patches. Also, once a disturbance has occurred (i.e., clearcut, land clearing, or flooding resulting from beaver activity) this optimal early successional habitat may be available for as little as 4 or 5 years before it is too brushy for golden-winged presence. In essence, the golden-winged warblers range is constantly changing as a result of land use patterns and forest succession.

The second major threat affecting the golden-winged warbler is the displacement by and hybridization with the closely related and more dominant blue-winged warbler (*Vermivora pinus*). Blue-winged warblers tend to tolerate a later successional stage of plant growth. Once a patch of habitat becomes too “grown-up” for golden-wings, blue-wings tend

to move in and take over displacing the golden-wings. The range of the blue-winged warbler has also shifted north resulting in areas of overlap with the range of the golden-winged warbler. These areas of overlap often result in the hybridization of the two species. Depending upon the degree of hybridization one of two hybrid forms may occur, the Brewster’s warbler or the Lawrence’s warbler. These hybrid offspring in turn breed with pure golden-wings, blue-wings, or less often, other hybrids and as a result the area eventually becomes totally inhabited by the more dominant blue-winged warblers.

### **What you can do to help**

If you observe golden-winged warblers, blue-winged warblers, or either of the two hybrid forms during the breeding season, record the location, the general habitat type and the prominent species of vegetation. This information can be reported to the WVDNR Wildlife Diversity Program at (304)-637-0245 or write Golden-winged Warbler Report, P.O. Box 67, Elkins, WV 26241.

Produced by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Section, and Wildlife Diversity Program.

February 13, 2003 date of original publication