

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER****OCTOBER 2025**

Figure 1. Adult male Blackburnian Warbler, 5 October 2024, Sun City, Maricopa County. Photo by Tommy DeBardeleben

One of the “confusing fall warblers” that irregularly wanders into Arizona is the Blackburnian Warbler (*Setophaga fusca*). Mainly nesting in coniferous and mixed-coniferous forests in northeastern North America, its range extends northwest into Canada and southeast along the Appalachian Mountains. Like many eastern warblers, particularly during fall migration to Central and South America, it may stray west of the Rocky Mountains. More than 30 reports have been documented in 8 Arizona counties since 1973, three-fourths of them from late September to mid-November. During migration it can be found in a variety of habitats even though breeding birds typically nest in coniferous and mixed-coniferous forests.

Adult males in breeding plumage are unmistakable; unlike other North American warblers, they sport a flaming-orange throat. They have black and orange crowns, black auriculars, and orange stripes above the eyes. Their underparts are yellowish to white, and their sides are streaked with black. The wings have a prominent white patch. In the fall and winter, the bright orange fades to yellow and the black auriculars fade to gray. The wing patch is then replaced with 2 white bars. Even then, the species remains distinctive and relatively easy to identify (Figure 1). Immature males in the fall are olive-grayish above, with a pale gray and yellow crown, pale yellow throat, white belly and undertail coverts, and 2 white wing bars. Overall, they are more plain than adult males in basic plumage. A key field mark that distinguishes Blackburnian Warblers of every age, sex, and molt is the pale streaks on the back sometimes referred to as “braces” (Figures 1 and 2).

Adult females in breeding plumage are similar to males in basic plumage. They are grayish above, with a grayish olive crown (apart from the yellow crown patch), bright yellow throat, and 2 broad white wing bars instead of a single large patch. Immature females (Figure 2) are the plainest and most confusing to identify; they have grayish backs, grayish auriculars bordered by very pale yellowish stripes, and pale-yellow throats and breasts.



Figure 2. Immature female Blackburnian Warbler, 28 November 2024, Sabino Dam, Pima County. Photo by Tracy McCarthey