SPECIES OF THE MONTH

BAY-BREASTED WARBLER

NOVEMBER 2026

The Bay-breasted Warbler (*Setophaga castanea*) is one of many eastern wood-warblers that casually visit Arizona, most often in the fall. Since the first report in the Chiricahua Mountains, Cochise County, in May 1972, 33 have been reported in 11 of the state's 15 counties. One-third of the reports have been since 2020, and several of the most recent are being reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee. Nine reports are from May and June when the males are especially attractive in full breeding plumage. Their bright chestnut caps, breasts, and flanks are distinctive. However, nearly three-fourths of the reports in Arizona are between September and February (55% in October and November), when they are in basic plumage and challenging to identify. Nonbreeding males, females, and hatch-year juveniles look much like Blackpoll Warblers (*S. striata*) and Pine Warblers (*S. pinus*).



Bay-breasted Warbler, Arivaca Lake, Pima County, 8 November 2023. Photo by Bill Scott

Unlike Blackpoll and Pine warblers, however, male Bay-breasted Warblers usually have tinges of chestnut on their sides and typically unstreaked underparts. A few Bay-breasteds have blurred streaking on the sides of their breast, but the streaking is not as well defined as in Blackpoll Warblers. Undertail coverts are normally buffier in Bay-breasted Warbler and whiter in Blackpoll Warbler, but many Bay-breasteds can have white undertail coverts. Bay-breasteds have a plainer face, with weaker eyestripes and supercilia than Blackpoll Warblers. Bay-breasted Warblers can also be confused with basic-plumaged Pine Warblers, which have similar coloration but unstreaked backs and contrasting white undertail coverts. The Bay-breasted Warbler is also distinguished from Blackpoll and Pine Warblers by its dark legs and feet and dark underside of its toes.

The Bay-breasted Warbler breeds in boreal coniferous forests across central and eastern Canada, northern Minnesota and Michigan, and northern New England. It nests primarily in northern spruce (*Picea* spp.)-fir (*Abies* spp.) forests, feeding on insects, particularly the spruce budworm pupae and larvae (*Choristoneura* spp.). It winters in Panama and northern South America, where it feeds on insects, but also eats fruit. Seasonal migration is principally east of the Rocky Mountains.

Populations of Bay-breasted Warblers fluctuate sharply depending on outbreaks of the spruce budworm. It is a Partners in Flight Watch List species and a species of conservation concern according to Environment Canada's Status of Birds in Canada. The observed decline of some populations may result from pesticide spraying and from the reduction of mature forests in favor of managed forests with shorter harvest cycles. Forest fragmentation also appears to reduce populations.