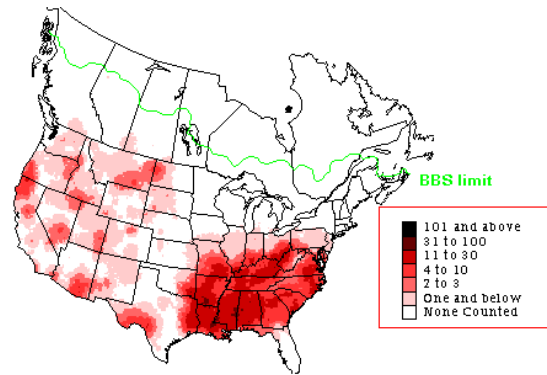
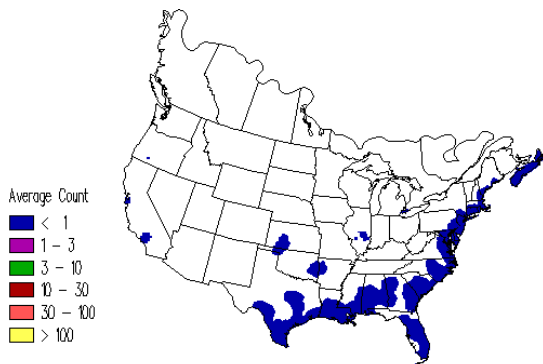


Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) Management/Conservation Profile

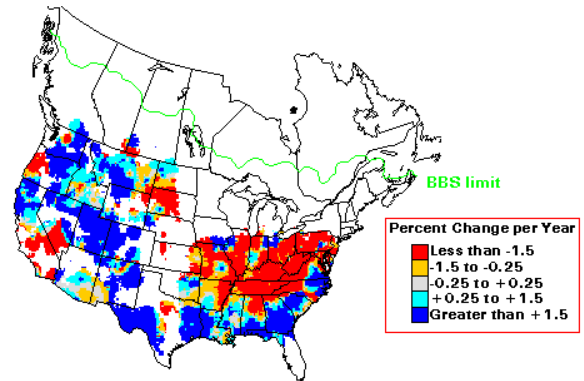
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Mecklenburg County-Division of Natural Resources



BBS Distribution & Abundance



CBC Winter Distribution



BBS Population Change

The Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) belongs to the Order Passeriformes, and is the largest member of the family Parulidae; the wood warblers of the Western Hemisphere. The genus name is Latin for “jaundice”, denoting this bird’s yellow throat and breast. The species name, *virens*, translates to “becoming green”, and is in reference to the olive-green back of the species.

Description

Arguably the most distinctive of the parulids, this tanager-sized warbler possesses an intensely yellow throat and breast, plain olive upperparts, white “spectacles”, and a thick bill. These traits, combined with a distinctive, mockingbirdlike song, make this species easily discernable in the field. Although sexes are similar, males may be distinguished by their brighter throat and breast, and darker bill and lores.

Range

A neotropical migrant, the Yellow-breasted Chat breeds throughout much of the United States, northern Mexico, and parts of southern Canada (see BBS distribution map). However, breeding populations do not occur throughout much of the New England region, Upper Midwest, or Florida panhandle, and their distribution is irregular in the west. In North Carolina, it breeds statewide but is typically absent from the

upper elevations of the mountains (>2,500 ft). While most chats winter from northern Mexico to Panama, a few may remain in the United States, primarily along the Atlantic Coast (see CBC map).

Status

The Yellow-breasted Chat possesses a Global Conservation Status Rank of “G5”, indicating that populations are widespread and seemingly stable. Breeding Bird Survey data (1966-2002) indicate a slight annual population decline (0.1%) for the entire survey area. Overall, populations appear to be declining in the east, but stable-increasing to the west (see BBS pop. change map). However, North Carolina BBS numbers suggest a slight annual population increase (1.35%) during the 37-year period. Within the state, populations appear to be stable or increasing in the north and east, but decreasing significantly in the western portions.

Habits

Skulking by nature, chats are more often heard than seen. However, males tend to sing from exposed perches or during flight songs, which frequently involve a vertical ascent, characterized by slow wingbeats, dangling feet, and a strongly pumping tail. Singing is quite variable but generally includes a distinctive assortment of harsh notes, rattles, whistles, squeaks, cackles, and scolds, which are often separated by long pauses. Unlike most warblers, chats will frequently sing at night during the breeding season.

Chats spend much of their time foraging on insects in low dense thickets. During the summer and fall, small fruits and berries make up a considerable component of their diet. In fact, fall banding stations have observed berry-eating chats to grow in orange throat and breast feathers during the prebasic molt.

Breeding chats have been described as loosely colonial, but with distinct nesting territories averaging two-three acres in size. Nests are typically built close to the ground (<2m high) in dense shrubs or tangles such as multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) or blackberry (*Rubus* sp.).

Habitat

The Yellow-breasted Chat is an early successional shrub-scrub species. Because natural disturbances today are limited in North Carolina, most shrub habitat is created by human activities. Exceptions, however, may occur in extremely hydric or xeric sites, or in areas with shallow soils. The coastal shrublands are another example of where this habitat is maintained naturally in North Carolina. Man-made shrublands occur primarily within utility rights-of-way, abandoned agricultural fields, and regenerating clear cuts.

Although chats will tolerate moderate amounts of grass and other herbaceous plant cover, a considerable amount of dense woody vegetation in the shrub/sapling successional stage must be present. These conditions generally develop from clear-cutting within two years, but abandoned agricultural fields often take several years to reach a shrub/young tree dominated successional stage. With either situation, the shrubland habitat created persists no longer than five-ten years.

Shrubland habitats typically have a good diversity of wildlife due to the mix of grasses, herbs, small trees, and shrubs. However, once the canopy closes and the growing space becomes dominated by trees, the habitat is no longer suitable for chats. In clear-cut situations, where all the trees are of equal age, this phase occurs when the canopy reaches approximately three meters in height.

The Yellow-breasted Chat does exhibit a slight degree of area sensitivity, and is not often found in isolated habitat patches less than three-four acres. Consequently, small forest openings created by single (or a few) tree falls or selection cuts are not generally used by chats.

Management Recommendations

- The most important limiting factor of Yellow-breasted Chat populations appears to be habitat availability. Consequently, the maintenance of early successional shrub-scrub habitat is essential.

- Clear-cuts are probably the most effective method of establishing new chat habitat. Logging that creates openings >10 acres should lead to the development of suitable habitat within 2-3 years.
- Shrub-scrub communities resulting from farm abandonment and logging are ephemeral in nature, typically persisting only 5-10 years. However, certain management practices can extend this period. These include 1) prescribed burning, 2) mechanical cutting, and 3) herbicide applications. Prescribed fire is the logical choice to maintain disturbance-dependant plant communities, and the frequency and intensity of burns can be adjusted to achieve the desired plant structure. However, when burning is not possible, mechanical or chemical methods may substitute. Selectively removing trees will encourage shrubs, grasses and other herbaceous vegetation. Unfortunately, management of shrub-scrub habitat with these methods can be costly and time consuming.

If shrubland management areas are large, then a rotational system can be employed in which entire sections are cut back at once using heavy equipment such as “drum choppers”, “KG blades”, or heavy duty flail mowers such as the “Gyro-trac”.

- Many landowners and managers are currently converting old agricultural fields to native warmseason grasses. Consideration should be given to maintaining some of these areas as shrubland habitat. While warmseason grass restorations are beneficial to a variety of wildlife, smaller fields (10-50 acres) are often not suitable for many of the more area-sensitive grassland bird species. However, avian shrub-scrub specialists such as Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, Blue-winged Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat will inhabit these smaller patches. Consequently, these fields may be more productive, with respect to songbird conservation, if managed as shrubland.
- Yellow-breasted Chats are moderately area sensitive. Consequently, habitat management efforts should be directed towards the maintenance of shrubland patches >10 acres in size. Smaller shrubland patches may be more likely to attract chats if additional amounts of similar habitat are available in close proximity.
- Utility rights-of-way should be managed to promote sufficient amounts of dense shrubby vegetation. This may be accomplished by periodic burning, mowing, or herbicide applications. In addition, rights-of-way may be used as corridors connecting other dispersed shrubland areas.
- Field/forest edges should be feathered to create a more gradual or “soft edge”. This may be accomplished by thinning the forest canopy (through selective logging, felling, or girdling) near the edge to allow sunlight to penetrate to the ground. A process known as “live dropping”, may also be used, in which trees along the edge are partially cut and allowed to fall out into the field. These trees remain alive and provide instant shrubby habitat. Additional field borders extending (5-10m) from the forest edge into the field should be protected from frequent disturbance and allowed to form a shrubland buffer.
- Thinned pine plantations may also attract chats, if enough sunlight reaches the ground to trigger growth of a dense shrub layer.

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