



# Prothonotary Warbler

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Mark Buckler

## Prothonotary Warbler

(*Protonotaria citrea*)

The prothonotary warbler's brilliant golden-yellow coloring led it to be named for the prothonotary, or chief clerk in an English court of law, who wears a bright yellow robe. Its beauty makes it a popular species among bird watchers.

### Description

The prothonotary warbler, a Neotropical migratory species that breeds in North Carolina, is a small, well-proportioned songbird measuring about 5 ½ inches in length. The male sports rich golden-yellow feathers on its head and belly. Its back is more olive yellow, and its wings a slate blue with no wing bars. The female's coloring is similar, but duller. Prothonotary warblers have long, slender, pointed bills and shiny black eyes.

### History and Status

The number of prothonotary warblers in North Carolina has been growing slightly over the past 25 years. It is estimated that North and South Carolina support 22 percent of the global population of breeding prothonotary warblers. Protection of bottomland and swampy, forest habitat, and possibly related to the comeback of the beaver in North Carolina, has contributed to the persistence of this species in the state. Nationally, prothonotary warbler populations remain stable, as well.

### Habitats & Habits

As the temperatures warm in spring, prothonotary warblers and other migratory songbirds move from the tropics to North America to breed. Prothonotaries prefer wooded, wetland habitats such as swamps, flooded bottomland forests, beaver ponds and streams with dead trees.

Courting begins after they arrive in late March and early April, with the male fluffing and displaying his plumage to a potential mate. Prothonotaries are unique in that they build their nests inside natural cavities made by woodpeckers and chickadees, or other ready-made cavities such as nest boxes or mailboxes. Males will line potential nest cavities in his territory with moss, but the female will ultimately select which cavity is best to use. She will then build the nest with fine grasses, twigs, bark, moss, and dead leaves to form a neat cup. Typically, they nest about 2 to 33 feet above ground and usually over water depending on nest cavity availability.

The protective woods provide food as well as shelter. Prothonotary warblers prefer to forage near the ground, but not on it, feeding on insects, spiders, and snails around tree trunks, on long limbs and in shrubs. Nearly all of their feeding is in the vicinity of water. With suitable conditions, prothonotary warblers usually attempt to breed twice in

The prothonotary warbler's brilliant yellow plumage makes it a popular species among bird watchers.



Dominic Sherony

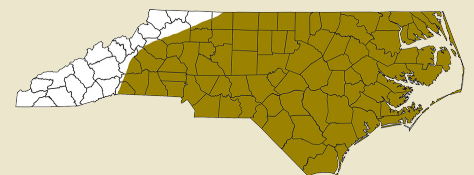


Female prothonotary warbler (Don Faulkner)

### Range and Distribution

Prothonotary warblers can be found from southern Ontario and western New York, west to Minnesota, and south to Texas and the Gulf Coast of Florida. In NC, they are common summer residents throughout the Coastal Plain. Prothonotaries breed sparingly in Piedmont North Carolina counties and very rarely in the mountains.

### Range Map



■ Prothonotary Warbler Range Map

# Prothonotary Warbler

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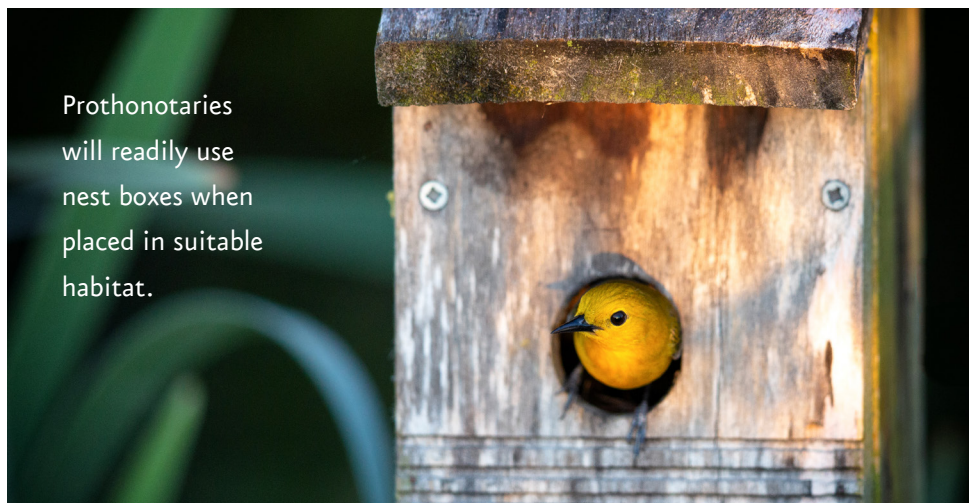
North Carolina. The first brood appears in early May, and the second in late June. The female incubates three to seven creamy white eggs with purple spots for about 13 days. Often the male feeds her as she warms the eggs. When the eggs hatch, both adults tend to the young. Sometimes, several prothonotary warblers may chase or “mob” a predator such as an Eastern screech owl to defend a nest or territory. Snakes also prey on these tiny songbirds. Fledgling warblers leave the nest in 10 to 11 days, but the bird family will remain together for a short time in the same territory. Prothonotary warblers typically do not roost, flock or migrate together in large groups.

The prothonotary warbler’s conspicuous yellow plumage makes it easy to spot in forests. Its call is a distinct loud, metallic-sounding chip. Its song is a ringing note, repeated six to eight times, sounding like sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet.

Prothonotary warblers remain in North Carolina through the summer, leaving around August to return to their winter grounds in Central and South America.

## Human & NCWRC Interactions

The prothonotary warbler’s brilliant plumage and cheery song make the bird popular among bird watchers. A good way to view this bird in its habitat is by canoe or visiting our many wooded parks with board walks. Prothonotaries will readily use nest boxes when placed in suitable habitat. Primary threats to the species are urbanization and the loss of habitat, especially old growth trees, which are more likely to develop cavities for nesting. As beavers continue to thrive in the state, their swampy homeland provides suitable habitat for the prothonotary warbler to live. North Carolina is important for prothonotary warblers and is a state that continues to support large breeding populations.



Lorie Shaull

Prothonotaries will readily use nest boxes when placed in suitable habitat.

## References

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[allaboutbirds.org/guide/Prothonotary\\_Warbler/lifehistory](http://allaboutbirds.org/guide/Prothonotary_Warbler/lifehistory)

## Credits

Written by Sarah Friday, updated by John Carpenter and Alexander Worm, 2022. NCWRC

## Wild Facts

### Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

### Average Size

Length: 5 to 5 ½ in.

### Food

Insects, spiders and snails

### Breeding/Young

One of two warblers that nest in cavities. Mate in early spring and in summer, producing 1-3 broods each season. Females lay 3 to 7 eggs, then incubate them for about 13 days. Young remain in the nest 10 to 11 days, and with family for a short time afterward.

### Life Expectancy

1 to 2 years on average; very rarely to 5 years



Prothonotary warbler chick (Jason Yoder)



Prothonotary warbler (Jay Ondreicka)