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# The Flyover



 **Mass Audubon**  
Berkshire Wildlife Sanctuaries

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By: Zach Adams

## Bread and Butter

Somewhere amidst the gailing wind and drum of steady rain that fell in gray waves, the month of May dropped on our doorsteps as did the fallout of so many of our new spring arrivals. The early week left trees in high elevations still shivering off snowfall, but the weekend jumped all the way to early summer with extraordinary blue skies and temperatures that bring dreams of fireflies and bullfrogs. If at any point this week you began to think, “Where are all the warblers?” then this weekend was the answer to that question. The dense string of gray rain that drove through Thursday and Friday held a brief interlude overnight where a wonderful new suite of insectivores finally arrived. Despite the impending rain in the afternoon, Friday turned out to be an incredible day of birding (even during the rain). If our times were not as they are now, Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary would be sending a delegation to Cape May, New Jersey for a guided birding trip, but our now is what we make of it, and each day of blue skies is a reminder to be present in the gifts of phenology.

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## A Week in Birds



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher: By Zach Adams

While the water temperatures and insects begin to warm in the far north of the Boreal forest and beyond, waterfowl are well on their way and the early week offered the waning excitement of ducks. Both white-winged and surf scoter made appearances this week, but unfortunately for far too short of a time. Scoters that make their way to the Berkshires are often blown off course and tend to appear uncomfortable as they restlessly move around lakes, often not staying even the duration of the morning. Joining the waterfowl visitors on the water this week was a surprise morning of gulls, including Bonaparte’s, 80+ Herring Gulls, and two Lesser Black-backed Gulls, as well as a few waves

of Osprey migration. The more secretive of water birds also made a skulky appearance in places like Richmond Marsh which attracted almost the entire field guide of secretive marsh birds. Both American and Least Bittern were spotted this week and often accompanied by rails, soras, and even gallinules.

If the charisma of the large birds wasn’t enough, warblers and other lyricists made that first big movement, leavening our ears to that harkened song. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, though having been present for a week or so, have made a much larger push becoming a common addition to the shrubs as they begin to leaf-out. The list of warblers grows longer this week with the songs of Black-throated Green, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white, and Yellow taking-up their parts in the chorus. Never an understated voice, the Wood Thrush’s arrival was much appreciated as its ethereal flute wraps around

each limb and leaf to reach our ears. As migration has progressed through the spring, it has seemed that one species at a time has tricked, and then arrived in waves of exciting numbers. Northern Flickers led Eastern Phoebes, to Ruby-crowned Kinglets, to hordes of Palm Warblers, to the final ounce of momentum, Yellow-rumped warblers. A handful of Yellow-rumps had been arriving and mixing in with the loose Palm Warbler flocks, until this week, where dazzling shows of blue and gold sallied across waterways and hedgerows. The friendly flashes of the outer tail feathers bring a smile and this week's bird of the week; the butter-butt.

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## Bird of the Week

### Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophega coronata*)

The bread and butter to a great spring checklist, or introducing someone to their first warbler, the Yellow-rumped Warbler is one of the most common and readily identified warblers that make their way through (and even breeds in) Berkshire County. Their warbled song on the other hand scratches plenty of heads, particularly later in the season when they begin mixing with the myriad of other pneumatic lacking warblers. Similarly misleading, the “butter butt” (as they are colloquially dubbed) is not unique to this warbler though, Cape May warblers share this yellow rump, and in the fall, both can appear surprisingly similar.<sup>2</sup>This confusion stops being a problem deeper into the fall and winter as our familiar yellow-rumped often winters much further north than almost any other warbler.<sup>3</sup>It is not unusual to even see this bird on Christmas Bird Count lists in New England.



Yellow-rumped Warbler: By Zach Adams

This northern wintering range is quite unique compared to the rest of their insectivorous family. You may have heard of their older name, the Myrtle warbler, which now is used to differentiate the eastern subspecies from the western subspecies (Audubon's Warbler), but myrtle is also accurate to their food source. Myrtle refers to a coastal shrub, bayberry, that produces waxy berries that are extremely difficult for most birds to digest, but is a food source of the Yellow-rumped Warbler in the winter, allowing them to survive without insects along the coast.<sup>4</sup>This is made possible by a unique adaptations in the digestive system that few birds share. Their heightened gall bladders and intestinal bile-salts create a much more efficient digestion of the wax coating on the dark purple bayberry berries.<sup>3</sup>It is hard to imagine these small, cheery birds consuming wax for the winter while now, they devour awakened insects that have poured onto the flowered trees; our butter-butt friends remain for hours in the lap of insect luxury. Whether the Yellow-rumped was the first warbler you have ever seen or one you have seen more than you could possibly count, it is hard not to smile when they sing and dance; a performance just for you.

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