



Pied-billed Grebes may be seen diving on area ponds. While small numbers breed in NC, many more northern grebes join us as winter tourists.



One of the first of the hundreds of Yellow-rumped Warblers I'll see this winter.

Brunswick Wildlife Joys of Winter Brrrrding!

Forget the cold! Winter birding in the Lower Cape Fear can be very enjoyable. We are blessed with many year-round species of birds plus those that overwinter with us, including the three featured here.

No matter that the temperature is 31° with a 35 MPH wind blowing sleet in your face. At least the biting insects have disappeared!

Many species of migratory songbirds breed in northern boreal forests and eat insects, insect larvae, and eggs. During fall migration many continue to the states south of us, the Caribbean, or South America while others stop and stay in our area for the winter.

How do they survive the winter in the Lower Cape Fear? Well, we still have a few insects during winter. Also, songbirds generally shift to berries, sap, and seed when insects are not active.

Songbirds tend to forage in mixed-species flocks during winter to improve their chances of finding food. These flocks roam the woods looking for food and often include chickadees, titmice, kinglets, woodpeckers, and other species.

Yellow-rumped Warblers are considered to be the most abundant warbler species in North America. Large numbers overwinter in the southern half of the US. They are abundant in our area during winter and finding them improves our chances of finding foraging flocks with other species. I will literally see thousands over the winter.

Wax Myrtles provide a great source of winter food for Yellow-rumped Warblers. By late summer wax myrtles produce clusters of waxy, bluish-white berries along their branches. The berries mature in fall and usually last until spring.

Yellow-rumped are one of a very few species that have adapted to digesting the energy-rich wax coating. While they still eat insects and other fruits when available, they have a reliable food source that allows them to overwinter far north of most species of warblers.

The Golden-crowned Kinglet breeds mostly in boreal spruce-fir forests of North America plus the higher elevations of the Appalachians including in NC. Its breeding range has been expanding southward probably due to reforestation of eastern spruce forests.

This kinglet overwinters north through much of its breeding range where nighttime temperatures may fall below -40°C as well as south across the US and northeastern Mexico. Its winter range includes a variety of coniferous and deciduous habitats.

They also join foraging flocks as mentioned above. They have another foraging advantage that allows them to migrate later in fall than many other warblers. Their diet is based on protected insects in hiding under buds and under bark instead of flying insects.

In addition to songbirds, we have many species of waterbird visitors. The Pied-billed Grebe's habitat includes freshwater marshes, lakes, and ponds; slow-running rivers; and protected, brackish waters in winter. They have the widest distribution of any waterbird in the western hemisphere, breeding from northern Canada through the tropics down to southern South America.

In our area, they are a rare local breeder in summer; however, they are common in winter because many birds from the northern part of their range (where bodies of water freeze) overwinter with us.

Pied-billed Grebes are aggressive! They threaten and attack other waterbirds including their own species. Because they migrate at night we normally do not see them fly. They are also strong divers when foraging and escaping from threats. While trying to observe grebes do not be surprised if they escape by sinking or diving below the water's surface...only to pop up a good distance from you. One of their common names, "helldiver", explains it all.

An early-morning trip to Brunswick Town/Ft. Anderson may allow you to find all three featured birds plus many others. Brunswick Town is open at 9AM Tuesday through Saturday which makes it convenient to stop at Orton Pond first. Safely pull off and park on the shoulder of Plantation Road near where it crosses Orton Pond. All surrounding property is private so stay at the roadside.

You should be able to find the warbler in trees on either side of the road. On the pond, you should be able to find a Pied-billed Grebe plus several species of ducks and American Coots. Grebes will likely be individuals compared to small flocks for ducks and coots.

The next stop will be Brunswick Town's visitor center where you will find trail maps. Walk the trails around the wetland area and those along the river's edge. Check small flocks of foraging birds in the oaks and wax myrtles along this route and you may find the kinglet. The kinglet is uncommon in Brunswick County so it will be the most challenging to find.

You'll need binoculars and a good field guide. Before you go, review the range maps in your field guide and note the potential species of ducks and small land birds that may be found locally in winter. Hint: there will be many!

Cornell Lab of Ornithology's All About Birds website is also a good source of information, range maps, and identifying field marks: <http://www.allaboutbirds.org>

Yep, I have birded under the conditions noted in the second paragraph because I had to. I don't recommend it. We are blessed with many wonderful winter days, having cold mornings without the wind and precipitation, perfect for an outing. Enjoy!

John Ennis



One of the smallest birds in North America, the Golden-crowned Kinglet is a winter visitor to the Lower Cape Fear.



Yellow-rumped Warblers are one of a few birds that have adapted to digesting the energy-rich wax coating of wax myrtle berries