

# COMMON YELLOWTHROAT - GEOTHLYPIS TRICHAS

**Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Passeriformes Family: Parulidae Genus: Geothlypis  
Species: G. trichas

## **Habitat:**

**Biomes:** Common Yellowthroats live in thick, tangled vegetation in a wide range of habitats—from wetlands to prairies to pine forests—across North America. Their breeding range stretches across most of the United States, the Canadian provinces, and western Mexico. Yellowthroats are most common in wet areas, which tend to have dense vegetation low to the ground, ideal for skulking and building hidden nests. But they are also found in dry upland pine forests, palmetto thickets, drainage ditches, hedgerows, orchards, fields, burned-over oak forests, shrub-covered hillsides, river edges, and disturbed sites. They winter in similar habitats with dense vegetation in the southern United States, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

## **Distribution:**

**In US:** It is an abundant breeder in North America, ranging from southern Canada to central Mexico. Northern races are nocturnal migrants, wintering in the southern parts of the breeding range, Central America and the West Indies. Southern forms are largely resident. This species is a very rare vagrant to western Europe.

**In Other Countries:** ^^^^^^^^^

**Holistic Description:** A broad black mask lends a touch of highwayman's mystique to the male Common Yellowthroat. Look for these furtive, yellow-and-olive warblers skulking through tangled vegetation, often at the edges of marshes and wetlands. Females lack the mask and are much browner, though they usually show a hint of warm yellow at the throat. Yellowthroats are vocal birds, and both their witchety-witchety-witchety songs and distinctive call notes help reveal the presence of this, one of our most numerous warblers.

**Species Richness:** 13 SUBSPECIES

**Population Dynamic:** Despite a decline in numbers in some areas, which is due to loss of favoured habitat, this species is still very common.

## **Evolution and Systematics:**

**Evolution:** Known from 5 elements (including coracoid and humerus) from at least 3 individuals. Bones found in Florida in deposits from the Rancholabrean period of the Pleistocene.

**Systematics:** Geographic variation observed in size and plumage across range. Although difficult to characterize, some general trends, at least in w. North America, include the following: extent and intensity of yellow tend to be correlated, being least extensive and palest to the north; populations in areas of lower humidity are generally paler.

**Number of Species:** 13 SUBSPECIES

**Number of Genera:** 13 SUBSPECIES

## **Physical Characteristics:**

**Size and Length:** Length: 4.3-5.1 in (11-13 cm) Weight: 0.3-0.3 oz (9-10 g)

**Wingspan:** 5.9-7.5 in (15-19 cm)

**Coloration:** Adult males are bright yellow below, with a sharp black face mask and olive upperparts. A thin whitish line sets off the black mask from the head and neck. Immature males show traces of the full mask of adult males. Females are a plain olive brown, usually with yellow brightening the throat and under the tail. They lack the black mask.

**General Body Features:** Common Yellowthroats are small songbirds with chunky, rounded heads and medium-length, slightly rounded tails.

**Special Features of the Body:** NONE

**Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs:** NONE

**Dentition:** BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

**Special Features of the Limbs and Digits:** NONE

**Any Special Internal Anatomy:** NONE

**Sexual Dimorphisms:** Adult males have black face masks which stretch from the sides of the neck across the eyes and forehead, which are bordered above with white or gray. Females are similar in appearance, but have paler underparts and lack the black mask.

**Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult:** Immature birds are similar in appearance to the adult female. First-year males have a faint black mask which darkens completely by spring.

## **Behavior:**

**Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular:** Diurnal

**Activity:** Males arrive first on breeding grounds in the spring and begin defending territories, fighting more intensely when the females arrive. The black mask is an important signal in male fighting: when researchers added a black paper mask to a stuffed female, males started attacking the stuffed bird, as if it were a male rival. Eventually, a male pairs up with a female and begins following her closely until she signals that she's ready to mate, by fluttering her wings and giving a fast series of chips. This display also attracts other males, which may mate with the female behind her mate's back. The females themselves may defend their territories against other females. Once the nestlings hatch and the parents are busy feeding the young brood, they relax their territorial defense. Nest predators include snakes, mice, chipmunks, raccoons, skunks, and possums, while adult yellowthroats are sometimes prey for Loggerhead Shrikes, Northern Harriers, Merlins, and American Kestrels. On wintering grounds, Common Yellowthroats may forage in mixed-species flocks but are usually solitary.

**Locomotion:** Adults and young hop among branches; may shuffle or side-step along a branch to get to food item or gain a better vantage point; may walk on ground, but usually hops. Usually short and direct, except during Flight Songs.

**Communication and Perception:** The male sings a distinctive witchety-witchety-witchety song, about 2 seconds long, to defend the territory and attract females. They give these songs very frequently during summer, averaging as high as 125 songs per hour and sometimes reaching 300 songs per hour.

**Home Range:** Males defend territories against conspecific males; females may also defend territories against other females. Size of territories variable, depending on the "pugnacity of the males, the desirability of the particular location, the number of individuals seeking territory"

**Degree of Sociality:** On wintering grounds, A. F. Skutch noted that yellowthroats were "always solitary, with no tendency to flock." However, birds have been observed foraging in mixed-species flocks in Dominican Republic.

**Level of Aggression:** Aggression often starts with Tchat Calls or Chatters, followed by a silent chase. Direct interactions involve rapid chases, sometimes followed by wing- and tail-flicking and grappling with intruder. Little fighting among males until arrival of females. Males apparently differentiate the sexes by sight as well as sound; experiments offering mounted male and female birds to an unmated male resulted in attack of the former and copulation with the latter. Adding a black paper mask to the female mount resulted in the male attacking the mount; after researchers removed the mask, the male returned and once again copulated with the mount.

**Migration:** Resident to long-distance migrant. Most populations migrate; some go short distances and others journey all the way from northern Canada to Central America. Some populations in the southern United States and Mexico stay in place year-round. Many individuals that winter in Central America fly across the Gulf of Mexico on their way north in the spring.

#### **Predators:**

**Predators:** Likely predators include snakes, e.g., water moccasins and black rat snakes, mice, and chipmunks. Perhaps less commonly, raccoons, skunks, and opossums may prey on eggs and nestlings. Migrating yellowthroat taken in flight by Chuck-wills-widow. Yellowthroats occasionally preyed upon by Loggerhead Shrikes, Northern Harriers, Merlins, and American Kestrels. In one instance, likely a very rare occurrence, remains of an adult were found in stomach of largemouth bass. An adult bird was observed caught in a spider web (also likely a rare occurrence) from which it extricated itself.

**Anti-Predator Defenses:** Responds to potential predators, including humans and striped skunks, with tchat notes. Flight Song performed in apparent response to presence of humans and, perhaps, other potential predators; serves to distract predators and warn mates.

#### **Diet and Nutrition:**

**Adult Diet:** Common Yellowthroats forage on or near the ground, eating insects and spiders from leaves, bark, branches, flowers, or fruit in low vegetation. Their diet includes bugs, flies, beetles, ants, termites, bees, wasps, grasshoppers, dragonflies, damselflies, moths, butterflies, caterpillars, and other larvae. Though they mostly glean their food while perched, they may sally out from a perch to catch prey. Like many birds, Common Yellowthroats also eat grit, which possibly helps them digest food or adds minerals to their diet.

**Juvenile Diet:** ^^^^^^^

**Special Adaptations for Getting Prey:** Primarily by gleaning, but also by sally-hover, sally-strike, and flutter-chase of flushed prey. Observed feeding at army ant swarms.

#### **Reproduction:**

**Mode of Reproduction:** Monogamous

**Mating System:** Monogamous within a breeding season; rarely polygynous.

**Mating Season:** April to May

**Courtship:** Courtship begins when females arrive. After pairing, male follows female closely. Copulation solicitation display of female consists of a "fluttering of wings accompanied by a rapid series of chipping notes, the chattering call". Female may also "flick" tail when soliciting copulation (Stewart 1953). Female may utter Chattering Call when nest-building.

**Territoriality:** HOME RANGE

**Mating:** Immediately before and during copulation, female crouches low, raises tail, and vibrates; male then flies to female and mounts for copulation, holding his head far back. Male may give Chittering notes during copulation; coition takes 34 s. GROUND.

**Nest Placement:** The female selects a nest site, which is usually on or near the ground and supported by sedges, grasses, reeds, cattails, briars, skunk cabbage, or other low plants. Nests in marshy areas are usually higher off the ground, where they are safer from flooding. On rare occasions the female may build in vegetation growing out of the water.

**Nest Description:** The female builds her well-concealed nest in 4-5 days (sometimes 2-3 days later in the season). She starts by building a platform of grasses and leaves and gradually weaves a loose, bulky outer cup of grasses and sedges. She adds smaller materials toward the center, sometimes in distinct layers. The outside of the nest averages 3.5 inches wide and 3 inches deep, while the inner cup averages 2.2 inches wide and 1.8 inches deep. Sometimes a Common Yellowthroat nest has a roof, like the nest of an Ovenbird.

**Egg-Laying:** Clutch Size: 1-6 eggs Number of Broods: 1-2 broods Egg Length: 0.6-0.8 in (1.5-2 cm) Egg Width: 0.5-0.6 in (1.2-1.5 cm) Incubation Period: 12 days Nestling Period: 12 days Egg Description: White with markings of gray, lilac, reddish-brown, or black.

**Hatching and Incubation/Gestation:** Helpless, with dark orange skin and wisps of grayish down.

**Development:** Altricial (helpless), psilopaedic (naked, or nearly so), and nidicolous (confined to nest). Few wisps of wet, sepia-brown (drying to grayish) natal down on cephalic and dorsal tracts. Skin dark orange; inside of mouth deep red; margin of bill pale yellow. Young able to raise heads and gape; length varies from 20 to 28 mm.

**Parental Care:** By female only. Young brooded regularly first 3-4 d posthatching. During day 1, female on nest almost constantly. By both parents. No evidence of regurgitative feeding.

**Lifespan:** Around 9 years.

**Conservation:**

**Official Federal Status:** Least Concern

**Special Statuses in Individual States:** NONE

**Threats:** Common Yellowthroats are numerous but they declining by almost 1% per year between 1966 and 2014, resulting in a cumulative decline of about 38%, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates the global breeding population at 87 million with 54% spending some part of the year in the U.S., 58% in Mexico, and 41% breeding in Canada. They rate a 9 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score and are not on the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List. Two sedentary populations have declined sharply from habitat degradation: one subspecies in the San Francisco Bay region dropped 80-95 percent in the past century; another, in Brownsville, Texas, fell so far that it was thought extinct. Both populations remain at risk, largely from wetland degradation and conversion to agricultural and urban landscapes. Rangewide, yellowthroats probably suffer most from habitat degradation and loss. Because they are insectivores and often live in wetlands, they are also susceptible to poor water quality and to pesticides and other pollutants. Common Yellowthroats are not the focus of any management efforts, but they probably benefit indirectly from efforts used for other species, such as waterfowl.

**Conservation Efforts:** ^^^^

**Extra Facts:**

1. The Common Yellowthroat was one of the first bird species to be catalogued from the New World, when a specimen from Maryland was described by Linnaeus in 1766.
2. Adult Common Yellowthroats sometimes fall prey to carnivorous birds such as Merlins and Loggerhead Shrikes. Occasionally they have more unexpected predators: one migrating yellowthroat was eaten by a Chuck-will's-widow, while another was found in the stomach of a largemouth bass.
3. Each male normally has only one mate in his territory during a breeding season. However, a female's mating calls often attract other males, and she may mate with them behind her mate's back.
4. One subspecies of Common Yellowthroat is a year-round resident in the Rio Grande river delta in Texas. These yellowthroats are not only territorial among themselves, but they also keep migrant yellowthroats of other races completely out of their habitat.
5. Brown-headed Cowbirds often lay their eggs in the nests of Common Yellowthroats (and many other songbird species). This is called brood parasitism, and it's detrimental to the yellowthroats, so they've developed a few defenses. They desert a nest if it contains a cowbird egg, or if their own eggs have been removed or damaged by a visiting cowbird. They may build a second or even a third nest on top of a parasitized nest.
6. The oldest Common Yellowthroat on record was at least 11 years, 6 months old.

**Notable Species:** NONE