

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Chestnut-sided warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*)



The chestnut-sided warbler is a small songbird, about 4-5 inches in size. Male chestnut-sided warblers have yellow crowns, a black eye-line and moustache, and chestnut-colored streaks along their sides. Females look similar, though they have less black on the face, and less pronounced chestnut streaking along the side.

May is the month of return for many birds, like the chestnut-sided warbler, that call New York forests home. Each year this easily recognizable bird spends its winters in mixed-species flocks in the moist, tropical forests of Central America. In the spring, the chestnut-sided warbler leaves its sunny paradise, making the long journey back to the eastern United States and Canada to breed and raise its young.

Once here, the chestnut-sided warbler prefers to nest in young, deciduous forests created by timber harvesting or natural disturbances, overgrown pastures and fields, and other brushy areas. In the midst of dense vegetation, this active bird searches the underside of leaves for insects, hopping among the branches and repeatedly cocking its tail up above its back like a wren.

Once a rare bird in the northeastern United States, the chestnut-sided warbler increased dramatically in the 1900s as forests were cut and suitable habitat was created. Today, it is one of the most common warblers breeding in New York State. However, its numbers are slowly declining as our forests mature and the availability of early successional habitats becomes limited.

The best way to create habitat for the chestnut-sided warbler is to provide young, brushy forest growth. Landowners can create optimal habitat by clearcutting, but even light thinnings, or moderate or heavy partial harvests can open up the canopy enough to allow light to reach the forest floor and encourage the necessary understory growth. Maintaining deer populations at low enough levels to avoid overbrowsing of the understory also can prevent unfavorable effects on this bird's habitat.

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at Arnotconservation.info

Chestnut-sided warbler photo courtesy of
Joyce Gross & CalPhotos, University of California, Berkeley