

Arctic Warbler

Phylloscopus borealis

The family *Sylviidae* (meaning "forest-dweller") represents a large and diverse Eurasian group composed of Old World, "true" warblers and gnatcatchers. The word "warble" means "singing with trills, runs or quavers," which typifies the songs of Arctic Warblers. Members of this family are very active insectivores. All are small and drab in color, with thin bills. The sexes vary little from one another in plumage but the young birds are unspotted. Arctic Warblers are unrelated to wood warblers (family *Parulidae*), although these groups are alike in plumage and habit. These groups are distinguished by the number of primary feathers (Arctic Warblers have ten versus nine in the wood warblers) and behavior (Arctic Warblers "skulk" while wood warblers are overt). Referring to their secretive nature in the forest understory, *Phylloscopus borealis* means "watcher from the leaves in the north."



As their name implies, the stealthy Arctic Warbler breeds in arctic habitats, particularly in dense, low vegetation and forest canopy. They lurk among tundra, northern coniferous and coniferous-deciduous forests, shrubs and riparian thickets, especially willows. A small (13cm) bird, the Arctic Warbler is relatively large-headed and long-winged, with long first feathers on their wings (primary projections). Distinctive long, pale-yellow eyebrows extend beyond the eyes and curve upward. They also are distinguished from other similar-looking birds (Orange-crowned and Tennessee Warblers) by their straw-colored legs and feet. Their olive tail is short and square. Sides, flanks, upperparts and wings are olive to olive-brown, and offset by the whitish-yellow breast and belly. A single, pale wing bar highlights the tips of the greater coverts.

Arctic Warblers rapidly trill a mechanical series of 8-10 "chrchrchrchrchrchrchrchrchrchr" or "chinginginginging" notes. Their call is a short, penetrating and buzzy "jeet" or "dzrk," much like that of the American Dipper.

Female Arctic Warblers build oven nests on grassy tundra or on the ground among willow thickets. The nests are dome-shaped with a hole in one side and are loosely constructed of fine grasses, leaves, and mosses. Lined with fine grasses and hair, these nests are soft shelters for the 5-7, 16mm eggs of the clutch. Eggs are white and spotted or occasionally encircled (wreathed) in pink or reddish-brown. Little is known about the breeding biology of this species. It is thought that the female incubates the clutch and that the offspring fledge in 10-11 days post-hatching. After hatching, it is believed that both parents rear the young.



Photo: CBRC

Insects, especially mosquitoes, compose the majority of the Arctic Warbler's diet. They hunt by hovering and gleaning insects from foliage, branches and ground plants.

The Arctic Warbler winters from Southeast Asia to the Philippines, Moluccas, East Indies and is widespread in northern Eurasia. Barely reaching North America, these birds breed in the tundra along the western arctic coast, interior (along the Denali Highway), on the North Slope of Alaska and throughout most of Russia.