

Northern Waterthrush

Seiurus noveboracensis

The family *Parulidae* is comprised of several New World genera (including *Seiurus*, *Dendroica*, *Vermivora* and *Wilsonia*) collectively known as the wood warblers. Wood warblers are a numerous and diverse group of small, active and colorful songbirds. The name "warbler" means "singing with trills, runs and quavers" and was originally applied to European warbler species, unrelated to the North American Wood Warblers. Despite their namesake, wood warblers do not actually "warble." Rather, many species of this family may have several distinctive and cheerful songs. Almost entirely insectivorous, wood warblers use their slender, straight and pointed bills to capture prey. The Northern Waterthrush is not actually a thrush but rather a ground-dwelling wood warbler. It is so named for its affinity for water and resemblance to thrushes in appearance and habit, particularly the boldly streaked breast. These wood warblers belong to the genus *Seiurus*, meaning "wagtail." Known for their horizontal body-posture, bobbing walk and habitual tail-flicking, Northern Waterthrushes are also aptly called "wagtail warblers."

As the name implies, the Northern Waterthrush inhabits the understory of wooded swamps and mixed coniferous-deciduous forests with standing or slow-moving water. At 15cm in length, these birds are rather long-legged, long-bodied and short-tailed, with narrow heads. Their upper parts are uniformly brown while their underparts are washed in yellow and heavily streaked in dark brown. Buffy or pale supercilia (eyebrows) and lores highlight the eyes. Characteristic behaviors include outstretched posture and habitual head-bobbing and tail-flicking. Look for these ground-dwelling wood warblers walking outstretched along the water's edge, rhythmically bobbing their heads and flicking their tails (much like a spotted sandpiper!).

Beginning with loud, emphatic chirps, the ringing song of the Northern Waterthrush ends in lower, more rapid notes: "sweet, sweet, sweet, swee, wee, wee, chew, chew, chew, chew." In the arctic, males are known to sing from atop willows. The call is a loud, hard and metallic "chink," with a strong "k" sound. During flight, the call is a buzzy, high and ascending "zzip."

Little is known about the breeding biology of the Northern Waterthrush. Ground nests are cup-shaped and usually hidden amid roots of uprooted trees or under overhanging banks, close to water. It is thought that the female assembles the nest of leaves, mosses, twigs and inner bark and lines it with fine materials. A clutch consists of 3-6, 20 mm, off-white eggs, variably spotted or blotched in purplish-gray. It is believed that the female alone incubates the eggs for about 13 days. In another 10 days post-hatching, it is thought that the offspring fledge and are cared for by both parents.

The ground-dwelling Northern Waterthrush forages among the forest canopy near the water's edge for both aquatic and terrestrial insects and invertebrates. They are also known to take mollusks, crustaceans and even occasionally, a small fish. In winter, these birds subsist primarily on insects. While foraging, they often flip or pull dead leaves from the ground or water. These wood warblers hunt by gleaning insects from the ground and foliage as they bob along the forest floor. In addition, they may wade into shallow water to glean prey from the water's surface or hawk flying insects from a perch.

Northern Waterthrushes fly south from California and the Caribbean winter in the mangrove swamps of northern South America, eastern Ecuador and northeastern Peru. In summer, they range throughout most of Alaska and Canada, across to the northeastern states and south into Washington and Montana.