



NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

How important can a tiny bird be?

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When you hear that this, that, or the other bird, mammal, fish, or other creature is endangered, or perilously close to extinction, one factor is often part of the problem: Us.

Specifically, our capacity to alter the natural world to suit one species — homo sapiens. We humans are so used to bending and adapting the world to meet our needs, it's easy to lose sight of a simple truth: every creature counts.

Including the tiny golden-winged warbler.

It weighs about as much as a paperclip. It flies 4,000 miles to winter in South America. And then returns in spring to forests in the Poconos to breed and raise young.



Golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*)

But not just any forest. For nesting and raising their young, golden-winged warblers need shrubby, low, open growth such as follows a fire. At the same time, close by, they need mature forest for perching, defending territory, and foraging for food.

The loss of natural habitat like that, and also in its wintering grounds, and along that long migration route, all put this endearing dynamo at risk. Their numbers have diminished so much that they have one of the smallest populations of any bird not actually on the endangered list.

And, because all life is connected, that's a problem for forests! Golden-wings eat only insects (which are found by the billions in forest canopies) — forest pests like harmful insects, spiders and caterpillars. So the birds need the forest. And healthy forests need the birds.

Suppressing fire results in forests of mostly same-size trees, without the shrubby undergrowth the warblers need. Clear-cutting to grow coffee results in, well, no forests at all.

All is not lost. Work is underway in state forests in the Poconos to help recreate lost habitat. Some local landowners are enrolling their private acreage in programs like Working Lands for Wildlife that benefit golden-wings and other migratory warblers. Researchers and advocates are working to move coffee-growing away from open, sunny plantations into more warbler-friendly shady forests.

Knowledge is power. Learn how our hard-working state foresters manage forests for wildlife, water quality, and the greater good at <https://www.dcnr.pa.gov/about/Pages/Forestry.aspx>

For information on a walk in local warbler habitat: <https://brodheadwatershed.org/delaware-state-forests-warbler-habitat/>

For information on enrolling your land as protected warbler habitat through Working Lands for Wildlife:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/plantsanimals/fishwildlife/?cid=stelprdb1046975>

For more information on this beautiful, important bird: <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/golden-winged-warbler-conservationstrategy-and-resources/>