



Species Spotlight

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Setophaga pensylvanica

May 2016

What is it?

Because of their preference for leafy, second-growth forests, clearings, and thickets, Chestnut-sided Warblers are common in the Northeast today. This is in contrast to the time of John James Audubon when it was relatively scarce. The great naturalist likely only spotted the bird once during his roaming of eastern North America in the early 1800's. Since then, the large-scale cutting and subsequent regrowth of forests created the brushy habitat that is ideal for Chestnut-sided Warblers, even as it made many other birds less common.

Hopping among branches of shrubs and small trees, it searches for insects on the undersides of leaves and twigs, or darts off of a perch to catch flying insects in mid-air. Males sing to defend nesting territory, belting out two song types: one accented at the end, the other not. The first is used before the arrival of females in the early nesting cycle, the second while raising young. Nests (built by the female) are placed in low dense shrubs or tangles, such as blackberry or rhododendron, or in deciduous saplings, such as alder or maple. It is a loosely-constructed, open cup often made with cedar or grapevine bark strips, fibrous weeds, grasses, roots, and plant down, then lined with fine grass or animal hair. Nests are often securely attached to twigs with repurposed spider webs.

Why is it important?

Chestnut-sided Warblers are classified into specific bird "response-guilds"¹. A guild is a category of birds that share similar behavioral or resource and habitat traits that help them successfully raise off-spring. Chestnut-sided's belong to *Low-canopy Forager*, *Shrub Nester*, and *Single-brooded* guilds. The numbers and types of birds that belong to specific guilds can be effective indicators of habitat disturbance. Changes in the availability of specific resources often show as population responses in species dependent on that resource. For example, the loss of snags (standing dead trees) in a forest stand can result in a decrease in birds of the *Bark-probing Insectivore* guild.

How does NETN monitor it?

During the breeding season (mid-May through late-June) a bevy of dedicated volunteers help to monitor breeding landbird study sites at participating NETN parks. During a survey, they look and listen

¹ From O'Connell et al 1998 MidAtlantic Highlands BCI report.

for birds at each count-station for 10 minutes recording them on field-mapping cards. Survey results help to assess park bird community health by examining the proportional species richness of the bird response guilds, resulting in a rank of Good, Caution, or Significant Concern for each one.

How is it doing?

Chestnut-sided Warblers are frequently detected in NETN parks during surveys as well as on the online bird reporting site eBird. Even though their population trend appears to be decreasing, the decline is not believed to be sufficiently rapid to warrant great concern. As of now, this is considered to be one of the few neotropical migratory birds that has greatly benefited from human activities, at least for the short term. Climate change will likely significantly impact their primary breeding range in the not-too-distant future.

For more information

Swing by NETN's website where you can find annual reports, monitoring protocols, maps, resource briefs, and volunteer materials for the breeding landbird monitoring program.

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“Please, please, pleased-to-MEET-CHA!”

- Chestnut-sided Warbler mnemonic.

The colorful Chestnut-sided Warbler travels a long way to reach its summer breeding grounds in the Northeast. Melanie Underwood photo.



<http://go.nps.gov/netn>