

# Kentucky Warbler

## *Oporornis formosus*

Breeding Kentucky Warblers occupy the shrub layers and understories of mature deciduous woods, preferring forest interiors and avoiding wooded edge habitats bordered by open fields. They are regularly found in both dry and mesic woodland communities, but generally avoid swamp forests. Most pairs occupy extensive forests or large woodlots of at least 25–30 acres. Small isolated woodlots, recently timbered habitats lacking defined canopies, and grazed woods are normally unsuitable.

The current distribution of Kentucky Warblers reflects these habitat preferences. The Atlas Project produced records from a total of 387 priority blocks (50.7% of the statewide total) within 76 counties. These warblers are widely distributed in the woodlands of the Unglaciaded Plateau and Illinoian Till Plain regions with records from 99.5 and 91.3% of their priority blocks respectively. Their representation declined to 47.9% of the blocks in the Glaciaded Plateau region, where Kentucky Warblers are widespread in counties bordering the glacial boundary but scarce and very locally distributed in northeastern Ohio. Few extensive woodlands remain in the Till Plain and Lake Plain regions and these warblers were found in only 21.8 and 8.4% of their priority blocks respectively. Most of these records pertained to isolated singing males, especially in northwestern and west-central Ohio. However, clusters of records in Delaware and Morrow counties, eastern Seneca County, and the Oak Openings of Lucas County may represent small populations.

Like many woodland warblers, Kentuckies are under-represented on Breeding Bird Surveys in Ohio where small numbers were detected in the Unglaciaded Plateau and Illinoian Till Plain regions. This species is actually fairly numerous in southern and unglaciaded eastern Ohio, although it becomes uncommon to rare and locally distributed elsewhere (Peterjohn 1989a).

The current distribution is a result of a gradual northward expansion of the Kentucky Warbler breeding range during the 20th century. Their original distribution is uncertain. Jones (1903) claimed they were fairly common summer residents in southern Ohio and nested nearly to Lake Erie. However, these claims were not substantiated by others and Heninger (1902) described them as rare residents in Scioto and Pike counties. Their numbers increased along the unglaciaded plateau during the first decades of this century. Breeding pairs were noted north to Columbiana County by 1916 (Weisgerber 1916) and they became “common” in portions of southern Ohio during the 1920s (Walker 1928a). This range was defined by Hicks (1935) as encompassing 40 counties north through Butler, Montgomery, Clinton, Ross, Fairfield, Licking, Knox, Ashland, Wayne, Stark, and Columbiana. They were locally distributed and uncommon at the northern edge of this range, but fairly common to common near Cincinnati and along the unglaciaded plateau north through Coshocton, Guernsey, and Monroe counties (Hicks 1937, Kemsies and Randle 1953).

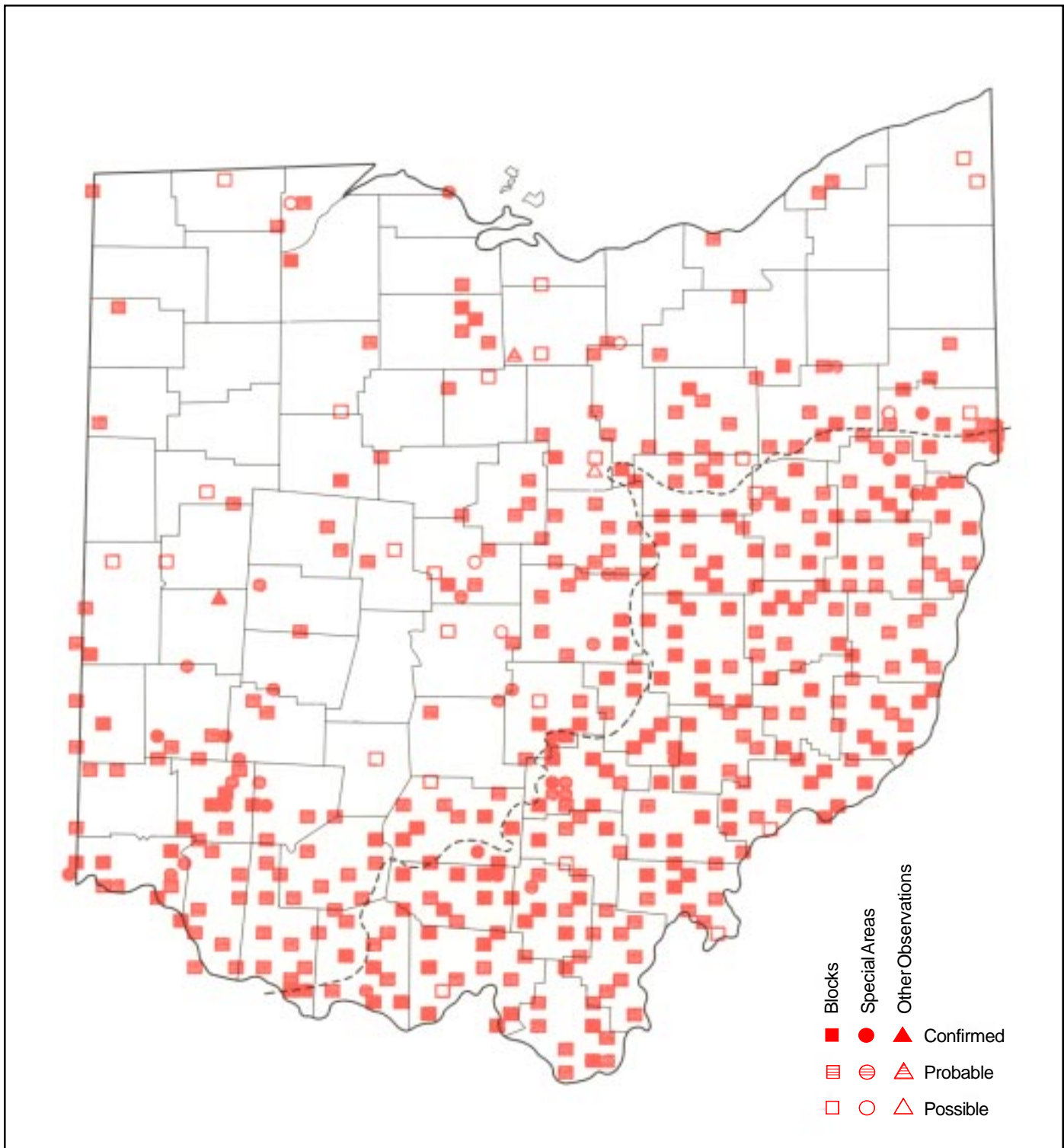
Kentucky Warblers increased along the northern edge of the unglaciaded plateau during the 1940s (Buchanan 1980). Their expansion into northeastern Ohio has been slow; they remain rare in most areas despite breeding at Youngstown in 1950 (Brooks 1950) and summering near Cleveland by 1960 (Newman 1969). Their expansion into the Till Plain and Lake Plain of central and western Ohio was poorly documented. Breeding pairs were reported from Ottawa County in 1958 and the Oak Openings in 1963 (Campbell 1968), but their initial appearance in most of these counties occurred during the 1970s and 1980s (Peterjohn 1989a).



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As is true for most occupants of woodland interiors, Kentucky Warblers are more frequently heard than seen. Their well concealed nests are bulky structures placed on the ground at the base of a sapling or shrub (Lloyd 1934). Most Atlas Project records pertained to probable breeders. Of the 152 confirmed breeding records in priority blocks, the “30” code was used in 97 blocks (83 in the Unglaciaded Plateau region). Adults carrying food for young were noted in 23 blocks, distraction displays were observed in 14 blocks, recently fledged young were found in 10 blocks, and active nests were discovered in 7 blocks.

The nesting chronology of Kentucky Warblers is poorly described within Ohio. Nesting activities are normally initiated during May. The earliest published egg date is May 27 (Lloyd 1934), although earlier clutches are likely in southern Ohio since nests with young have been reported in Adams County by June 4 (Braund 1940b). Fledged young appear in the southern counties by June 15–22, but are not expected in northern Ohio until June 25–July 5 (Peterjohn 1989a). Some pairs may raise two broods, resulting in nests with young through July 12 and fledglings into early August (Trautman 1940).



**Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region**

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	8	8.4	2.1	—
Till Plain	271	59	21.8	15.3	—
Ill. Till Plain	46	42	91.3	10.9	0.4
Glaciated Plateau	140	67	47.9	17.3	—
Unglaciated Plateau	212	211	99.5	54.5	2.3

**Summary of Breeding Status**

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
<b>Total</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>50.7%</b>
Confirmed	152	39.3%
Probable	211	54.5%
Possible	24	6.2%