

NATURE IN BLACK-AND-WHITE

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At the start of Spring—which in this new era of climate change seemingly arrives in mid-to-late March rather than mid-April—I start to look and listen for one of the earliest migrating wood warblers returning to us from its winter home in the southern U.S. and Central America. I am searching for a small bird that creeps along branches and trunks, but has the peculiar habit of starting from the canopy and working its way to the ground. Typically, when you look for birds and especially most wood warblers, you look for specks and splashes of color—the orange of American Redstarts, the yellow of Yellow Warblers, or the rich palette of colors in the plumage of Chestnut-sided Warblers, to name a few. But the bird I am after is an exception to this rule and is aptly named the Black-and-white Warbler. Unlike most other warblers, its early 1950s look is reminiscent of the era when our televisions and movies portrayed two tones instead of a kaleidoscope of hues.

And then I hear a male. Sitting on a branch, it throws back his head and utters an odd squeaky wheel song: “see-wa, see-wa, see-wa”—the giveaway to the presence of this harbinger of spring and the chorus of singers soon to follow him from down south. This singer is a small bird with a streaky pattern of feathers. The male has a black cheek, while the similar female does not.

I notice that little attention is paid to the Black-and-white Warbler among avid birders when there are much more colorful varieties to spot. And maybe there is even a built-in bias: after all, color vision is part of what made us so successful as a species. Most mammals outside of primates see only black-and-white, because most mammals are nocturnal, making color vision less advantageous. Further, neuroscientists tell us that something like 90% of all incoming

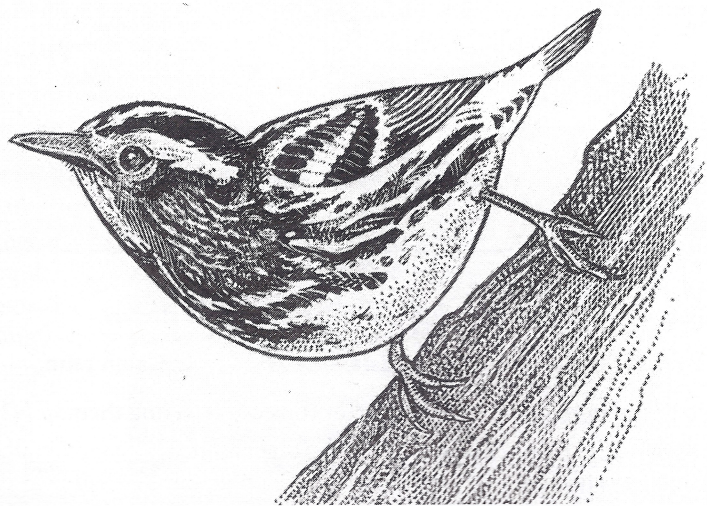
stimuli to our *Homo sapiens* brains comes from visual cues and thus, not surprisingly, 50% of our brain is dedicated to vision processing. So looking at a warbler with black-and-white streaks on its body triggers less excitement than the flaming orange throat of a Blackburnian Warbler.

“See-wa, see-wa, see-wa.” The male Black-and-white Warbler repeats its refrain, reminding me to value our senses besides sight. If humans had such limited hearing that we couldn’t hear the squeaky wheel imitation of the Black-and white or the more neighborly “Please, please please to meetchya” song of the Chestnut-sided Warbler or even the “tea-kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle” of our Carolina Wrens, would we be missing out on the joy that birdsong brings, especially in Spring? Visuals are exciting for sure, but don’t songs fill us with more emotion?

When a Black-and-white Warbler starts to forage, things become even more interesting. The bird’s Latin genus name *Mniotilta* means “moss-plucking” and refers to how the bird hops along trunks and branches searching crevices for its meal of arthropods, a technique called ‘bark-gleaning’ in the bird literature. This feeding behavior is more like that of a nuthatch or tree creeper than like other warblers. Other members of the

warbler family fly from a perch to grab a flying insect, a technique called sallying, or feed on the ground and specialize in turning over dead leaves, like the Worm-eating Warbler. Many flit from branch-to-branch to search leaves for fat caterpillars in various parts of the trees, especially oaks, which harbor the most kinds of caterpillars of any group of trees in the world. Ecologists call these varied feeding strategies a diversity of feeding niches, much as another influential ecologist—Dr. Seuss—described creatures called “nutches” and their behavior.

Unlike the others of its kind, the Black-and-white Warbler feeds on branches and trunks, and thus is not bound for its foraging by the emergence of new leaves in Spring. This exemption means that the Black-and-white Warbler can arrive earlier than the other species and start feeding even when the leaves of the trees are still in bud. This independence from leaf flushing may be one reason why Black-and-white Warblers are so common. And regardless of how the vagaries of climate change disturb the leafing out of our trees in future Springs, the Black-and-white, steady as she goes, will likely stick to its task, hopping up and down the trunks and branches, plucking insects in its curved beak, anchored by its strong legs, toes to the bark, searching for the next juicy bug. **VN**



Black and white warbler. (Illustration by Trudy Nicholson)