

# Migrant Mayhem

by Jennifer Brumfield

- ❖ Commission wanted: Illustrate the Magee Marsh boardwalk of northwestern Ohio in May.
- ❖ Include: Variety of warblers (choose from 30+ species), the boardwalk, and birders.
- ❖ Illustrator asks self: How do I “snapshot” one of the greatest birding spectacles of all time and cram it within the bounds of an 8.5 × 11 piece of paper?
- ❖ Engage: Prepare proper drink on the rocks and sharpen pencils.

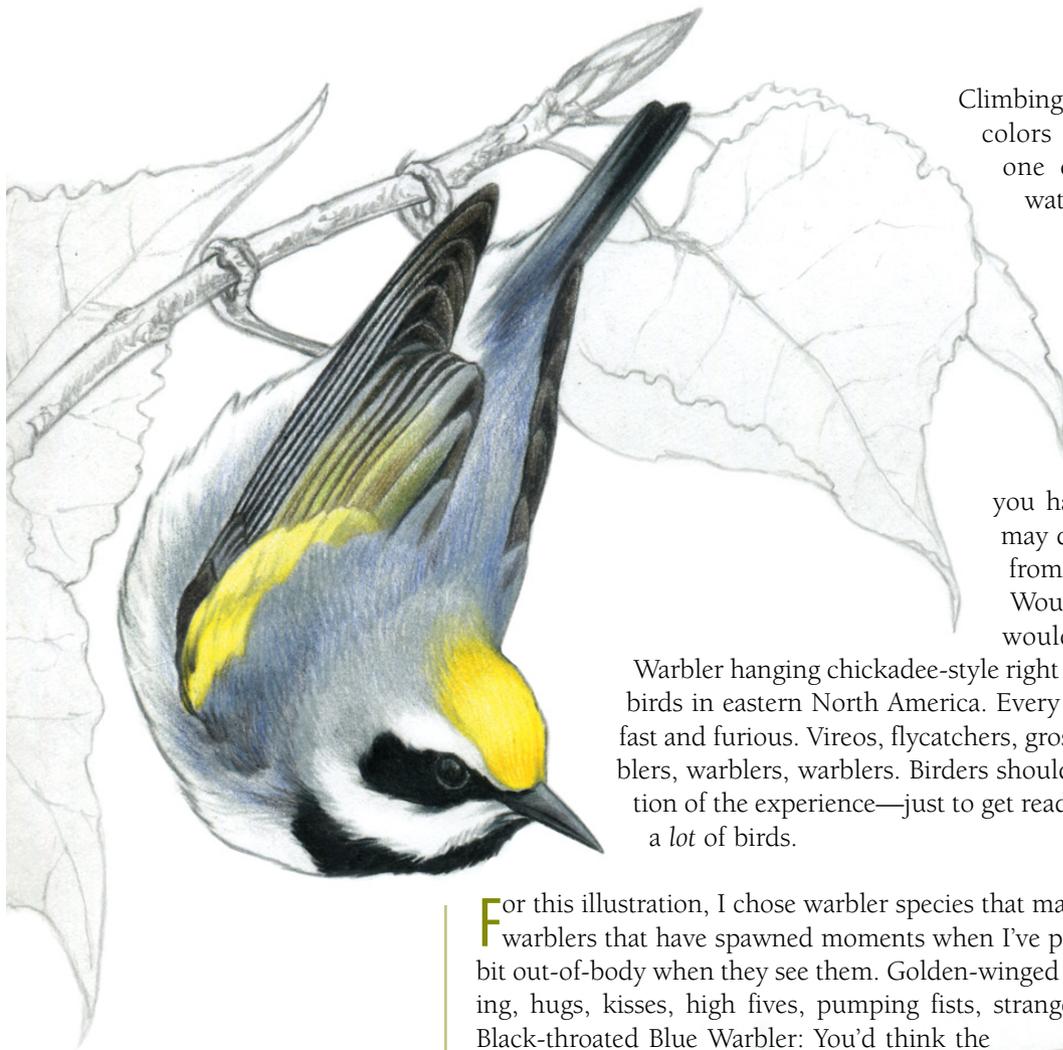


**B**ut first...Remember...  
Month of May...and...  
Warblers.

We're addicted to them. Obviously. Don't have to tell you that. It's January and you're sitting there fiending for them. Counting down the months till they hit the Gulf again. Counting the weeks until the winged waves lift from the southern Americas and cloud the night headed for U.S. soil.

In spring you become a basement meteorologist. You can feel low and high pressure systems in your bones. You're glued to radar maps. You stay up till two a.m. to see if that front will actually pass through, whispering *fallout fallout fallout*. The Weather Channel absolutely dictates your daily plans. Calling off work was never so easy. Use these excuses: "H1N1," which is a true gift, as no one will want you in the office for weeks; and "Weddings"—they're very popular in May. Weddings are a brilliant excuse.

You'll track the warblers day by day, mile by mile, until they stream north toward the Great Lakes and beyond. Palm-sized birds on serious uppers. Nervous. Twitchy. Hangin' around.



ABOVE:  
The **Golden-winged Warbler** takes shape. Plumage detail is mainly in place by now, but work remains on the nearby cottonwood leaves and twig.

RIGHT:  
This **Ovenbird** shows head detail in early stages of the illustration.

Climbing. Flitting. Mind-blowing, vibrant colors and myriad patterns. Certainly one of my favorite bird families to watch and illustrate.

You should see the boardwalk at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area—or pretty much anywhere in northwestern Ohio for that matter—in spring. The masses can't get enough. The birds are thick and stunning.

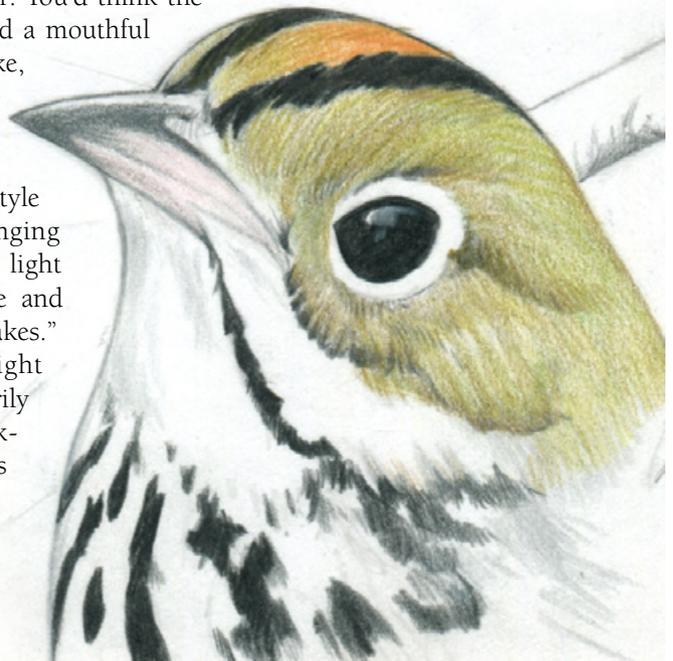
Dizzying. Should be careful if you have a heart condition, really. You may drop right there on the boardwalk from sheer ecstasy of warbler overload. Would be a nice way to go, though—wouldn't it?—with a Golden-winged

Warbler hanging chickadee-style right over your head. One of the sexiest birds in eastern North America. Every which way you turn. The pace is fast and furious. Vireos, flycatchers, grosbeaks, tanagers, orioles, and warblers, warblers, warblers. Birders should design a video game—a simulation of the experience—just to get ready for it. Know what you're up for: a *lot* of birds.

**F**or this illustration, I chose warbler species that make people spazz. Meaning, certain warblers that have spawned moments when I've personally observed folks go a little bit out-of-body when they see them. Golden-winged Warbler: Mumbled speech, sweating, hugs, kisses, high fives, pumping fists, strange celebratory interpretive dances. Black-throated Blue Warbler: You'd think the observer had just swallowed a mouthful of the world's best cheesecake, and, again, odd dancing. Canada Warbler: Have seen grandmas and grandpas go into cross-country-style jogging toward a bird singing down the trail, and also, light dancing and not-too-subtle and debatably attractive "hip shakes." Bay-breasted Warbler: Light cursing becomes momentarily socially acceptable. Black-burnian Warbler: Tears borne of awe.

But, back to the drawing board. Colored pencils.

Capture the moment in May.



A glimpse of the boardwalk is enough. Don't need to place fine detail on the birders, either. It's a slice in time—a memory—a momentary glance at all the action. The fine detail is meant for the birds. Black-and-white Warbler scooting down a cottonwood. Flash of a Blackburnian's fiery throat. A sporty male Black-throated Blue alert and snapping from out of the undergrowth. An inquisitive Ovenbird bobbing along the forest floor. A Canada Warbler, a male, erupting from a thicket with a fresh necklace and glaring white eye-ring. An acrobatic Golden-winged Warbler showing off in the cottonwoods overhead. Bay-breasted peeking around the corner.

As an artist, I try to capture the fine details of plumage—get the colors just right. Match fine feathering to life: Make sure the supercilium tapers correctly. The primaries aren't too short or too long. The bill is fine and neither too thick nor too thin. Shape. Proportions. Behavior is also absolutely key. To best represent a bird on paper, one must know that species from experience. To understand, say, exactly how it flicks its wings or how it holds its head and tail. Whether it drops its wings or keeps them tight against its sides. Does it sit alert or hunched over? Is it sleek and quick to dart off into vegetation? Or does it soar lazily on thermals with open-fingered primaries. Capturing the essence of a species is the goal. In that moment, a frozen piece of time on a piece of paper, can you make the bird alive?

My *Migrant Mayhem* is specifically a tribute to years of walking the boardwalk again and again. And again. Each spring. Migrating myself—with hundreds of fellow birders, just as thousands of warblers, flycatchers, vireos, tanagers, and other winged wonders do. It's a celebration of color. Of birds and moments that elicit some of the grandest experiences I've known in my birding life—and have shared with equally grand company. It's a tribute to the wonder of palm-sized passerines that make a phenomenal journey north, without fail, and to the birders who appreciate and protect them.

See you out there.

— Jen Brumfield

Want to see more of Jen Brumfield's art? Check out her website, including a portfolio of her art:  
<http://www.meadowhawkart.com>

Check out Jen's blog and follow along for her offbeat, high-octane birding adventures:  
<http://birding.posterous.com>

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The illustration takes form. There is more color detail on the **Ovenbird** and **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, plus light sketching of the surrounding leaves, boardwalk, and birders.



TOP:

With its deep-hued blue-purple and yellow-green coloration, the **Mourning Warbler** has an especially intense appearance. *Colored pencil by © Jennifer Brumfield, 2009.*

MIDDLE:

Although it lacks the bright colors of many warblers, the **Brown Creeper** is notable for the intricate patterns of dark and light on its upperparts. *Colored pencil by © Jennifer Brumfield, 2009.*

BOTTOM:

Roger Tory Peterson called the **White-crowned Sparrow** "one of the handsome sparrows," an assessment borne out in Jennifer Brumfield's rendering. *Colored pencil by © Jennifer Brumfield, 2008.*

