

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Prairie Warbler *Dendroica discolor*

The Prairie Warbler is a familiar breeding bird of forest edge habitats in much of the eastern United States and southern Ontario. It winters in coastal South Carolina and from northern peninsular Florida and the Bahamas to the West Indies.

Two subspecies are recognized (AOU 1957), and both breed in Florida the northern subspecies (*D. d. discolor*) and the resident Florida Prairie Warbler (*D. d. paludicola*).

Habitat. The northern race of the Prairie Warbler is a resident of forest edge habitats, pine barrens, and shrubby second-growth woodlands. Stevenson and Anderson (1994) report that in Florida this race is found most often in young pine-hardwood stands. The Florida race is generally restricted to mangrove woodlands along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, but is also known to breed in coastal stands of live oaks (Stevenson 1978). Other aspects of the life history of the 2 subspecies are essentially the same. The Prairie Warbler forages actively in the lower branches of trees and shrubs. Its diet consists mainly of insects and spiders. Nolan (1978) reports that the young are fed mainly on caterpillars.



Illustration © 1995 Diane Pierce, All Rights Reserved.

The cup-shaped nest is built of plant fibers, string, spider webs, and other similar materials. It is generally placed <3.0 m (10 ft) above the ground or, in the case of *paludicola*, over the water. A clutch typically consists of 3 or 4 white eggs spotted or wreathed with shades of brown. Incubation lasts about 12 days and the young fledge in about 9 or 10 days. The Prairie Warbler is a frequent *Brown-headed Cowbird* host, deserting the nest if it is parasitized.

Seasonal Occurrence. The northern subspecies is a common migrant throughout the peninsula with spring migration extending into June and fall migration beginning in July (Woolfenden and Robertson 1992). The Florida Prairie Warbler is a resident along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Nesting begins about mid-May and extends well into July.

Status. The northern subspecies of the Prairie Warbler is a relatively recent addition to the state's list of breeding species. It has extended its known breeding range into Florida in the latter half of this century. Howel (1932) stated that it "is not definitely known to breed in the state," and Sprunt (1954) described the breeding range as extending south to southern Alabama and central Georgia. Atlasers confirmed breeding throughout the northern part of the state, and it is now considered to be an uncommon breeder in the Panhandle and north Florida. Numerous "possible" breeding records were reported by observers in the central and southern peninsula. These were assumed to represent *discolor* migrants within the safe-dates (15 May - 1 Aug), therefore, they were deleted from the Atlas map.

The Florida Prairie Warbler is an uncommon to common resident of coastal mangrove woodlands along both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Unlike the northern subspecies, its range has remained relatively unchanged. On the Atlantic coast, breeding was confirmed north to Brevard County, with "probable" breeding north to Flagler County. On the Gulf coast, Stevenson (1978) reports that it breeds as far north as Levy County, but it was four

only as far north as northern Pasco County during the Atlas project. During the 1980s much of the mangrove habitat north of Pasco County was killed by severe cold weather. This loss of habitat may explain the lack of records in this region during the project.

The Prairie Warbler's distinctive high-pitched, buzzing song makes it an easy species to locate in areas where it occurs. However, the general inaccessibility of its mangrove habitat makes the Florida race rather difficult to confirm as a breeder.

The future of the Florida race is somewhat uncertain. Because of extensive destruction of the mangrove habitat is dependent on, the Florida Prairie Warbler was listed as a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals (Stevenson 1978). Although habitat destruction is no longer as great a concern as it once was, a more recent and potentially serious threat is brood parasitism by two species that have recently expanded their ranges into the state. The *Brown-headed Cowbird* has been steadily expanding its range into Florida from the north and the *Shiny Cowbird* has moved into the state from the Caribbean within the last decade. It remains to be seen whether these two species will have an adverse impact on the Florida Prairie Warbler.

Sean P. Rowe

Prairie Warbler

