



## Nature at Risk Series: The tiny Black Poll Warbler bird is on the brink

By Carol Hillestad for Brodhead Watershed Association

SLATE BELT - an you imagine what it would be like if everything in your world changed? If you couldn't eat the food, or if the land became too hot or too dry? If you couldn't find what you needed to feed your kids and keep them safe? If nothing at all made sense?

It sounds like a scary sci-fi movie. But it's real life for every creature whose habitat is destroyed.

"Habitat" is just a fifty-cent word for natural home. Just as humans have very specific needs to live, so do beaver, bats, black bear, frogs, snails, muskrat, possums, deer, eagles, other birds and every living thing.

Some creatures, like the blackpoll warbler, know what it's like to lose their essential habitat, the basics of life.

Even though it's a native of northern Pennsylvania, you may never have seen or heard a blackpoll warbler (*Setophaga striata*). The birds nest in cool, high-elevation spruce swamps and forests — a habitat once common and far-reaching here, but now cut-down, built-over, and very rare. That's why seeing nesting blackpolls here has become almost unheard of.

The northern wetlands they need — rich in spruce trees, larches, and pines — have all but disappeared in and around Monroe County. The varied trees and shrubs of the boreal forest and the grasses, mosses and lichen provided nesting materials and safe nesting sites. A smorgasbord of insects, spiders, and centipedes provided food.

Blackpolls still find what they need in northern Canada. So while it's unlikely you'll ever see them nesting in our area, you may see them as they pass through, transient migrants on their way to somewhere else.

This tiny bird has the distinction of flying the longest migration pattern over water of any songbird. Headed south in fall, blackpolls cross the north Atlantic Ocean on their way to wintering grounds on the north coast of South America. On the return trip north in spring, they are among the last birds to leave for the long flight to northern Canada.

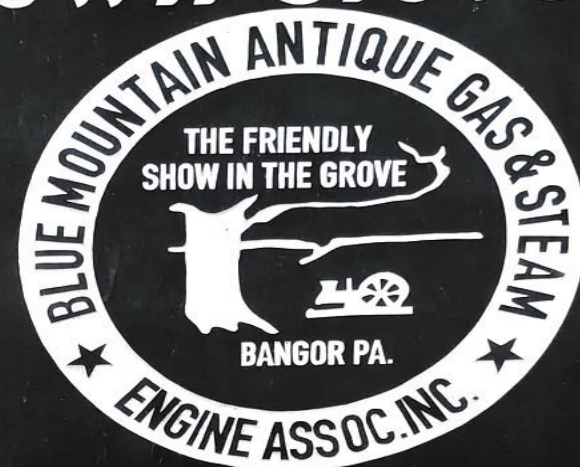
Without a magic wand that would enable us to restore the habitat they need, blackpolls will not be local nesters again. Can their loss teach us not to smash, destroy, and pave over waterways, woods, and habitats that we don't even fully understand?

If we learn a little humility, perhaps. In the meantime, if you see blackpoll warblers passing through, count your lucky stars.

For more information on the blackpoll warbler go to <https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/EndangeredandThreatened/Pages/Blackpoll-Warbler.aspx#>

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