

**Status and Occurrence of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) in British Columbia.**  
**By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.**

**Introduction and Distribution**

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) is a small passerine found breeding across North America from Florida up the east coast to southern Maine, into southern Quebec, through southern Ontario, south through Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, part of Colorado, Wyoming, parts of Montana, southern Idaho, Oregon, with birds breeding south into Mexico (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The entire northern population is migratory and most winter from Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern Texas into Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Kershner *et al.* 2012). North of Oregon, this species is an accidental vagrant. In Washington State, there are 13 accepted records of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is an accidental vagrant with over a dozen Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are scattered records from Alberta and Manitoba (Kershner *et al.* 2012). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a rare vagrant to the Maritime Provinces (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

**Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is covered in all standard North American field guides. In the context of British Columbia, there is no other species that looks like the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher so identification should be fairly straight-forward. The following description is taken from Kershner *et al.* (2012). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a very small, bluish gray, long-tailed songbird. This species measures in total length 10.0 to 11.5 cm; and weights in mass 5 to 7 grams. The males and females look very similar to each other in basic plumage, but males are distinguished from females in alternate plumage (January-August) by a black forehead and supercilium. The tail constitutes over 45% of the bird's total length. The bill is fine-tipped and narrow with a slight lateral flattening at the bill base surrounded by prominent rictal bristles. The upperparts on adult birds are bluish to ultramarine colour. There is a prominent white eye-ring with the underparts white. The tail is black with the outer rectrices edged with white. The tail is frequently fanned showing the white edges. Juvenile birds are washed grayish overall with a fleshy gape and a loosely-textured contour in the feathers.

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher makes a loud explosive “*pwee*” call note. The song is a series of high, thin, notes, chip and buzzy notes (Sibley 2000).

The only species in British Columbia that remotely looks like the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is the Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*). This species is about the same size and measures 11 cm (Dunn

and Alderfer 2011). The Bushtit is overall gray in colour, with a brownish crown and a small black bill (Sibley 2000). There is a dark line that goes from the base of the bill to the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are black (Sibley 2000). Though similar in size and shape, the Bushtit should not pose any confusion with a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

In British Columbia, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is an accidental species with 17 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are records from a number of regions of the Province with Vancouver Island having the most records with 8 records, there are 5 records for the Vancouver Area, there is 1 record from the Fraser Valley, and there are 3 records for the interior coming from Keremeos, Nakusp and Pemberton (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). This species turns up in British Columbia predominantly in the fall with 13 records occurring from August to December (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There is one record for May and 3 records for the month of June (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Most occurrences of the Blue-gray Gnatcatchers found in the Province are with mixed flocks of Kinglets, Chickadees or Bushtits, but they can also be found on their own (Campbell *et al.* 2007). The pattern of vagrancy found in British Columbia is repeated in Washington State where 9 of the 13 state records come from the August to November time period (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). There are also 3 summer records spanning from May –July and a single February record (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). Observers should watch for this species in the future as the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher breeds as close as Oregon and has a clear pattern of wandering north of its common range. Whenever possible it is also encouraged that observers try to photograph and document sightings of this little southern visitor if they find it anywhere in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Record #8: Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Nakusp on November 14, 2006.  
Photo © Gary Davidson.



Figure 2: Record #16: Blue-gray Gnatcatcher along the dyke at Boundary Bay on October 16, 2016. Photo © Peter Candido.

**Table 1: Records of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult November 10-11, 1963: A. R. Davidson, mobs (BC Photo 78) Uplands Park, Victoria (Anonymous 1963, Boggs and Boggs 1964a, Davidson 1966, Roberson 1980)
- 2.(1) adult November 19-December 1, 1981: D. Mike Price, mobs (BC Photo 775) Kitsilano Park, Vancouver (Campbell 1982b, Mattocks and Hunn 1982a, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 3.(1) adult August 1, 1983: R. and F. Stoba: Saanich, Victoria (Hunn and Mattocks 1984)
- 4.(1) adult October 24, 1984: Peggy Irving, Muriel Upshall : 1234 W. 14<sup>th</sup> Ave, Vancouver (Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 5.(1) adult male June 12-13, 1994: Sandra Scott Sutherland, mobs: Bowen Island (Bain 1994d, Bowling 1994, Plath 2000, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 6.(1) adult male August 5-6, 2002: David Woodward, mobs (photo) RPBO, Metchosin (Cecile 2003a, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 7.(1) female September 4, 2006: Quentin Brown, Murray MacDonald: Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Cecile 2007a, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 8.(1) adult November 14-25, 2006: Gary Davidson, mobs (photo) Nakusp (Cecile 2007a, Davidson 2007a)
- 9.(1) female September 25, 2007: Rick Toochin: West Coast Road, Shirley (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 10.(1) female October 28, 2007: Mary Robichaud, mobs (photo) Lagoon Rd., Esquimalt Lagoon, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014b) [likely same bird as above]
- 11.(1) adult May 21, 2011: Chris MacDonald (photo) Keremeos (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

- 12.(1) female December 3-8, 2011: Steven Roias, and other observers: Beacon Hill Park, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 13.(1) adult June 28, 2012: John Tschopp : Pemberton (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 14.(1) female October 1-December 9, 2012: Steven Roias, and other observers: Swan Lake, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 15.(1) adult male June 30, 2014: Rick Toochin (FN) Delair Park, Abbotsford (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)
- 16.(1) female/immature October 16, 2015: Kevin Louth, mobs (photo) between 96<sup>th</sup> – 104<sup>th</sup> St., Boundary Bay, Delta (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)
- 17.(1) female/immature November 2, 2015: Mike and Barb McGrenere, mobs (photo) Chinese Cemetery, Victoria (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult December 30, 1979: Adrian Dorst: Chesterman's Beach (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 2.(1) adult male June 29, 2005: Don Wilshere: Port Alberni (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 3.(1) [heard only] August 18, 2002: David Allinson: RPBO, Metchosin (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 4.(1) male December 14, 2005: Brooks Road, Chilliwack (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

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