

The Status and Occurrence of Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*) in British Columbia. By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*) is a beautiful passerine that is common in eastern North America. This species is found breeding in eastern Canada from southern Ontario, across southern Quebec through New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). There have been isolated breeding pairs found in Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In the eastern United States the Black-throated Blue Warbler is found breeding from north eastern Minnesota (where it is scarce), northern Wisconsin, northern Michigan to New England south to Connecticut, and south through the Appalachian Mountains and the adjacent mountains of New York south to northern Georgia (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species migrates mostly from the Appalachian Mountains east through Florida with a few scattered reports from the Great Plains states south to Texas and Louisiana with more reports coming from these outlying areas in the fall than the spring (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Black-throated Blue Warbler winters mainly in the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles of the western Caribbean with small numbers wintering in Florida (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species winters casually in Bermuda and the Lesser Antilles with small numbers of birds wintering along the Caribbean Coast of Mexico from Veracruz and the eastern Yucatan Peninsula south to Panama and into South America in Columbia and Venezuela (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Black-throated Blue Warbler has turned up once as an accidental vagrant in the fall to Belcher Island in the Northwest Territories (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species is a rarity throughout the mid-states and Alberta (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Along the west coast the Black-throated Blue Warbler is a regular migrant only in California where there are over 700 records with over 95% of them turning up in the fall into early winter (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). It is not a review species of the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, the Black-throated Blue Warbler is no longer on the state review list by the Oregon Bird Records Committee as there are twenty-five accepted records (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are nine accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Black-throated Blue Warbler is a casually occurring species with twenty-six Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2013d, see Table 1). There is one late fall record for Juneau Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2003). The species is an accidental vagrant to Greenland, Iceland, and the Azores (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alfrey 2006, Rodebrand 2012).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Black-throated Blue Warbler is fairly straight-forward and is covered by all standard North American field guides. The adult males have a complete black face with black eyes and a small thick black bill (Sibley 2000). This black extends onto the upper part of the

throat, down the sides of the neck onto the sides of the breast and flanks (Curson *et al.* 1994). The breast is snowy white and this white colour extends to the undertail coverts (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The tail is long in overall length (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The central tail feathers are dark blue with the upper surface of the tail blackish in colour on the outer tail feathers with the inner tail feathers also dark in colour (Curson *et al.* 1994). There are white spots on the inner webs of the three outer rectrices (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The tail tip is also dark in colour (Sibley 2000). The underside of the tail is white except for dark spots on the tail tip and along the outer edge of the underside of the tail (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The legs are a pale fleshy colour (Sibley 2000). The forecrown, top of the head back down to the rump is dark blue (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Adult males found in the Appalachian Mountains have dark streaks on the upper back that can be almost a black back patch on some individuals (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000). The upperwings are also dark blue with dark primaries and a large white patch in the bases of the primaries which can vary in size from 9-14mm long (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The underside of the wings is mostly white with a dark secondary edge that leads into the dark primaries (Sibley 2000). First year males are very similar to adult males, but have greenish edges to the tertials on the wing feathers (Dunn and Garrett 1997). On some birds the green extends further on the wings and extends up the back (Dunn and Garrett 1997). All first year males have a reduced white primary patch as well as brown coloured primary and wing covert feathers (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Most first year males have white edges to the black feathers on the upper throat and chin (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Black-throated Blue Warbler adult females are completely different looking from the males. The adult females are olive on the back and yellow below lacking any of the rich blue and black colours of the adult males (Dunn and Garrett 1997). On the crown there is a bluish tinge to the feathers found only on the adult females (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000). Besides the overall colour tones, the adult female Black-throated Blue Warblers have a distinct white supercilium over the eye and white eye arc below the eye (Curson *et al.* 1994). There are no wing bars, just a reduced but obvious white primary patch on the wing (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The legs are like the males, a pale fleshy colour (Sibley 2000). The tail is long in length with a bluish tinge on the upper side of the tail (Sibley 2000). The underside of the tail is darkish in colour (Dunn and Garrett 1997). All adult females have grey, not white, on the inner webs of the three outer rectrices which are reduced to two outer rectrices in first year females (Curson *et al.* 1994). The first fall females are similar to the adult females, but are brighter yellow below on the breast, lacking any blue tones anywhere on the bird (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The undertail coverts are whiter than in the adult female (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The supercilium over the eye and the eye arc below the eye are buffier in colour than the adult females with the base of the bill a pale fleshy colour (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The song of the Black-throated Blue Warbler is a lazy series of three to five buzzy “zwee” notes that are even in pitch or can be slightly descending, but concludes with a strong

ascending buzz (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This is often interpreted as “zwee-zwee-zwee-zweeee?” or “zur-zurr-zreee” (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The call notes are a soft “tik” or “thik” or “dit” that is very similar to the call notes given by the Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The flight note is a distinctive prolonged “tseet” (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Black-throated Blue Warbler is a species that occurs in British Columbia predominantly in the fall into early winter with some birds attempting to winter over. Out of the twenty-six Provincial records, fifteen have been found between the dates of August 10-November 30 (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, see Table 1 & Table 2). There are five records of birds occurring in the period of December 1-February 28 (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, see Table 1). The Black-throated Blue Warbler’s tendency to occur mostly in the fall period into the early winter is repeated throughout the west coast from Washington to California, including the only record for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2003, Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, WBRC 2012). This pattern of fall vagrancy is not repeated in the spring, as records are scarce along the west coast, including British Columbia (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, WBRC 2012). There is only one spring migrant record for British Columbia as well as a bird that wintered in Balfour until late April (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, see Table 1). The remaining Provincial records are from the summer months with four records mostly in late June and one for July (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, see Table 1). From California north to British Columbia, the Black-throated Blue Warbler is a species that is found in the fall, but not very often in the spring and very rarely in the summer (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). For whatever reason birds that appear in the fall all along the west coast do not seem to migrate northward in the spring in any kind of numbers or frequency. The factors that push the Black-throated Blue Warbler westward in the fall are obviously not present in the spring. This lack of occurrence in the spring is interesting as it doesn’t follow the established pattern found in other eastern warblers of turning up as spring vagrants in the classic late May to mid- June window (Roberson 1980, Toochin 2000, Toochin 2013c).

On November 19, 2010, Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne found a male Black-throated Blue Warbler in a garden in Sandspit on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2013c, see Table 1). The bird appeared after a strong storm that had come up from the south, often called the Pineapple Express, as these storms come from waters off Hawaii and are fast moving bringing heavy winds, rain and mild temperatures (M. Meredith pers. comm.). It is highly probable that this bird was lost at sea off California and was pushed northward to be deposited on the Queen Charlotte Islands (M. Meredith pers. comm.). This weather pattern occurs in October and November which is the peak of eastern warbler occurrence in California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Many of these lost eastern warblers keep flying west, often to their deaths offshore in the Pacific Ocean (Roberson 1980, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). This weather pattern likely explains many

of the records of eastern warblers such as Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*), Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*) and Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Setophaga pensylvanica*) that have been found by lucky observers in late October and November from both the west coast of Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands because all of the above names species are regularly occurring species in California in the fall (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin 2013c).

Given the ever increasing frequency that Black-throated Blue Warblers are encountered in British Columbia, it is likely more records will come in the future with the majority of them occurring in the fall.



Figure 1: Black-throated Blue Warbler male at Sandspit, QCI on November 19, 2010. Photograph © Margo Hearne.

Table 1: British Columbia Records of Black-throated Blue Warbler:

- 1.(1) immature male September 22, 1984: Gary Davidson, mobs (photo) near office of Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area, Creston (Davidson and Van Damme 1987)
- 2.(1) adult male October 1-2, 1985: (photo) near office of Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 3.(1) male November 25-27, 1987: (photo) Maple Bay, Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 4.(1) male October 2, 1988: Cec & Eileen Dillabough: near Mission Creek, Kelowna (Campbell *et al.* 2001)

- 5.(1) 1st year male December 12, 1993- January 16, 1994: Gary Davidson, mobs
(photo: specimen UBC 15172) Naskusp (Davidson 1994, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 6.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male April 20, 1994: Karen Wiebe: W. 16th Ave. & Marine
Dr., Vancouver (Bowling 1994, Davidson 1995, Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 7.(1) adult June 30, 1995: Lorne Russell: Big Fish Lake, Invermere (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 8.(1) adult male August 14, 1995: Rinchen Boardman, mobs: Gagnon Creek Banding Station,
Mackenzie (Bowling 1996, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 9.(1) adult male June 25, 1997: Colin Bowen: Cypress Bowl Provincial Park, West Vancouver
(Toochin 2013a)
- 10.(1) female August 10, 1998: Edgar T. Jones: Roberts Creek, Sunshine Coast
(Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 11.(1) male October 10, 1998: A. Gemmell, M. Gemmell: Kelowna (Shepard 1999,
Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 12.(1) male October 11, 1998: Len Jellicoe, Dianne Jellicoe: Okanagan River, near Osoyoos
(Shepard 1999, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 13.(1) adult male November 20, 2000-April 21, 2001: G. DeMott (photo) 17 Mile, Balfour, near
Nelson (Cecile 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 14.(1) female October 21, 2001: Rick Toochin, Jamie Fenneman: Iona Island Sewage Treatment
Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2013a)
- 15.(1) adult male June 28, 2002: David Allinson: Victoria (Cecile 2002, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 16.(1) adult male December 11, 2002: Ruth Goodwin, mobs (photo) Kimberley, near Cranbrook
(Cecile 2003, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 17.(1) adult male October 2, 2006: Rick Toochin: Sooke (Cecile 2007, Toochin 2012,
Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 18.(1) 1st year male December 15, 2007-February 17, 2008: Dudley Freeman, mobs (photo)
Nanoose Bay (Cecile 2008, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 19.(1) adult male September 29, 2008: Chris Saunders, and other observers: East Sooke
(Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 20.(1) adult singing male June 11, 2010: Doug Brown: 48 km on Johnson Creek FSR, south of
Hudson's Hope (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 21.(1) adult male November 19, 2010: Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne (photo) Sandspit, QCI
(Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 22.(1) adult male September 25, 2011: Michael Force, Chris Siddle, mobs: Winfield Creek
Preserve in Lake Country (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 23.(1) 1st year female December 18-25, 2011: Russ Cannings, mobs (photo) Penticton
(Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 24.(1) adult male October 6, 2012: Pierre Geoffray: Powell River Area (Toochin *et al.* 2013d)

- 25.(1) adult male November 1, 2012: Rick Toochn, Corina Isaac: Hope Airport
(Toochn 2013b)
- 26.(1) adult male July 11, 2013: Rhys Harrison: Trans Canada Trail, Princeton
(R. Cannings pers. comm.)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Black-throated Blue Warbler records in British Columbia:

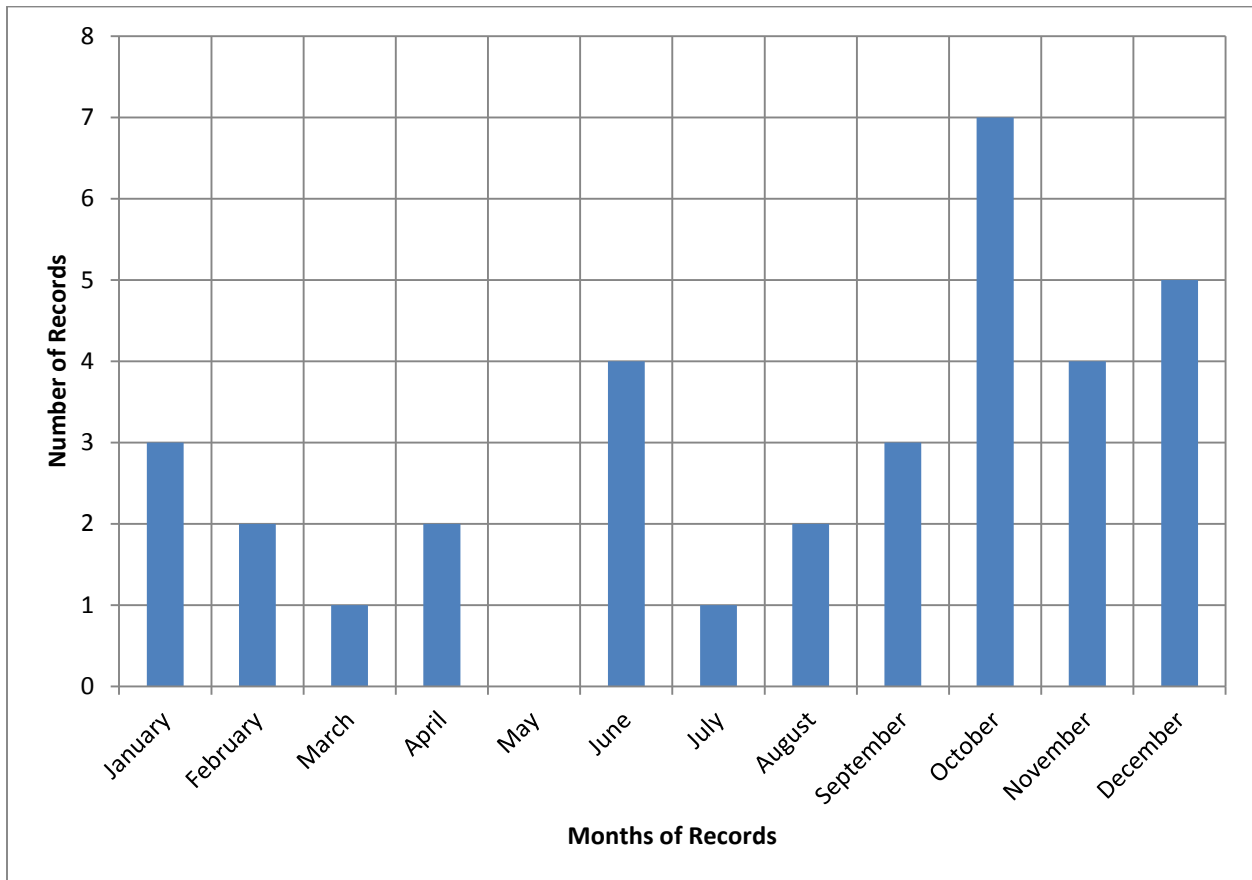


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the fall of this species with October having the highest number of records.

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