

Status and Occurrence of Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) is a beautiful passerine found breeding from northern California, west and southern Nevada, southern Idaho, south-central Montana, south-central North Dakota, southwestern Minnesota, central and north-eastern Illinois, northwestern Indiana, northern Ohio, southern Pennsylvania, and south-eastern New York; south to Georgia, and central Florida, across the Gulf States away from the coast, throughout Texas, and west to Arizona (Beadle and Rising 2006). It is found rarely breeding south to northern Baja California. This species breeds south throughout Mexico, and is a resident species in the highlands and Pacific Lowlands of Central America; and in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua to central Costa Rica (Howell and Webb 2010).

The Blue Grosbeak is a migratory species throughout its North American range and moves south from its western range into Mexico and from the eastern United States across the Gulf of Mexico, throughout Mexico and south into Central America (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species has been reported in the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, The Cayman and Swan Islands and Bermuda (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Blue Grosbeak winters in southern Baja California and northern Mexico, along the Gulf of Mexico, and south throughout Central America to central Panama with rare individuals wintering from the Gulf Coast of Florida north to New England (Beadle and Rising 2006, Howell and Webb 2010).

The Blue Grosbeak is a casual vagrant species well north of its breeding range with many records from Atlantic Canada, southern Quebec, southern Ontario, and individual records from southern Saskatchewan (Godfrey 1986), and Wisconsin (Beadle and Rising 2006).

North of California, the Blue Grosbeak is a casual vagrant to Oregon with ten accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). There are no records of the Blue Grosbeak for Washington State accepted by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, the Blue Grosbeak is an accidental vagrant species with only a few provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This species is accidental in Alaska with two state records: one of an adult male bird found in Petersburg from August 6-7, 1989 (Gibson and Kessel 1992); and the second of an adult male found in Skagway from July 9-13, 2012 (Heinl and Piston 2012).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Blue Grosbeak is covered in all standard field guides. The Blue Grosbeak is a small species measuring 17 cm with a wingspan of 28 cm, and weighs 28 grams (Sibley 2000). There is recent published molecular research that shows that this species is closely related to the "*passerina buntings*" in both behaviour and in nesting habitats (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species is larger than the smaller, but similar looking Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) which measures 14 cm, has a wingspan of 20 cm, and weighs 14.5 grams (Sibley 2000). The Blue Grosbeak has a habit of constantly flicking and spreading its tail while perched (Beadle and Rising 2006).

The adult male in (alternate) or breeding plumage is a striking bird that has a large conical shaped bill with a black upper mandible and a gray lower mandible (Beadle and Rising 2006). The head has a slight crest; there is a black mask at the base of the bill to the black eyes (Beadle and Rising 2006). The head, face, neck, back, rump, breast is a dark blue (Sibley 2000). The undertail coverts are also dark blue with light white lines (Sibley 2000). The tail is dark and long with a rounded tail tip that has light white corners (Sibley 2000). The wings are dark with two bold rufous wing bars; the tips of the feathers in fresh Basic males are buff or rusty, obscuring the blue colour which is exposed by wear (Beadle and Rising 2006). The legs and feet are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult females are brown to grayish brown overall, sometimes with blue flecks, with pale lores and undertail coverts and rusty median coverts, buffy-tipped greater coverts, forming two wing bars (Beadle and Rising 2006). The large conical bill is black on the upper mandible and brown on the lower mandible (Sibley 2000). The legs and feet are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Birds hold first basic plumage from August to March (Sibley 2000). These birds are a very warm rufous-brown overall and are unstreaked on the breast (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The brown juvenile plumage is replaced by a presupplemental moult during which all of the body plumage and most or all of the flight feathers are replaced; young males vary from being completely brown like female birds to mostly blue (Beadle and Rising 2006). The first basic plumage is acquired by a prebasic moult from July through October of most or all of the body plumage (Beadle and Rising 2006). The first alternate plumage is acquired by a partial prealternate moult in early Spring, involving most head feathers (Beadle and Rising 2006). The definitive basic moult is complete and may be suspended during the fall migration, and the definitive alternate plumage is obtained by a limited prealternate moult (Beadle and Rising 2006).

The song of the Blue Grosbeak is a rambling, rich, run-on warble that sounds similar to that of "*Haemorhous finches*", but lacks the burry qualities of the Purple Finch (*Haemorhous*

purpureus) or the House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) and the paired phrases of an Indigo Bunting (Beadle and Rising 2006). The call note is a loud, metallic “*tink*” or “*pink*” (Beadle and Rising 2006).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Blue Grosbeak is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 4 records. The first record was of an adult singing male found by an experienced observer J. Sirios on the slopes above Goat River near Erikson in the Creston Valley on May 22, 1982 (Butler *et al.* 1986). The second record was of an adult female found by Neil Dawe and R. Wayne Campbell near Downie Creek, 41 km north of Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 2001). The third record for British Columbia was of an adult male found by Rick Toochin just outside Hope on May 24, 2013 (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). This bird was observed singing from a Willow Tree along Lorenzetti Creek at less than 100m before flying northward and out of view (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The fourth provincial record was of an adult female found by volunteers at Rocky Point Bird Observatory in Metchosin and was photographed, constituting the first photographed record for British Columbia, before disappearing on August 25, 2015 (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.). Photographs taken of the bird can be viewed at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28936564@N08/20859677126/> and show the bird from almost every angle. This species has far too few records to develop a vagrancy pattern. The Blue Grosbeak is a trans-gulf migrant in the southeast; Spring arrivals turn up in the first week of April with migration, continuing through the second week of May (Lowther and Ingold 2011). This species arrives in southern California in mid-April with birds arriving in South Dakota in mid-late May (Lowther and Ingold 2011). The Blue Grosbeak has been known to do massive over-flights in the Spring during the months of April and May in the east with large years recorded in Massachusetts in 1956 and 1973 (Veit and Petersen 1993). There are two May records from British Columbia from the third week of May which suggest these birds were likely Spring overshoots (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The single early July record is also a likely late spring overshoot that was wandering around looking for a breeding partner (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are few fall records north of California suggesting that birds don't likely wander north in the fall (OFO 2012). It is more likely, that birds probably fly directly southward after finishing breeding, passing through Mexico and Central America with eastern birds probably crossing the Gulf of Mexico (Lowther and Ingold 2011). The one fall British Columbia record may well have been a bird that overshoot in the late spring and spent the summer somewhere in northern interior before heading south since this species tends to head straight south in fall from the breeding grounds. This bird will show up at bird feeders and could be found by a feeder watcher in the future.

Table 1: Records of Blue Grosbeak for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult singing male May 22, 1982: J. Sirios: slopes above Goat River near Erikson in the Creston Valley (Butler *et al.* 1986)
- 2.(1) adult female July 2, 1991: Neil Dawe and R. Wayne Campbell: near Downie Creek, 41km north of Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 3.(1) adult male May 24, 2013: Rick Toochnin: near Hope (R. Toochnin Pers. Comm.)
- 4.(1) adult female August 25, 2015: Ann Nightingale, mobs (photo) Rocky Point Bird Observatory, Metchosin (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.)

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