

The Status and Occurrence of Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) is a sparrow-like species found in the tall grass prairie of the Great Plains of the central United States (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species breeds from eastern North Dakota (except in northernmost areas), western and southern Minnesota, central and southern Wisconsin, and the Lower Peninsula of Michigan (locally on the western Upper Peninsula), south to the Gulf Coast of Texas and southern Louisiana, but excluding Mississippi Delta region, west to west-central South Dakota, west-central Nebraska, but excluding the panhandle region, eastern Colorado (locally in central Colorado), and central Texas (areas east of Rio Grande), and east to western Ohio, central Kentucky, central Tennessee, northwest Alabama, and northern half of Mississippi (Temple 2002).

The core wintering area of the Dickcissel is the llanos region of central Venezuela which is a seasonally flooded grassland region that is now been mostly converted to agriculture (Basili and Temple 1999). Smaller numbers occur regularly or irregularly for all or part of the winter in peripheral areas that include open agricultural areas of the rest of Venezuela, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, northern Brazil in Roraima, north and coastal Colombia, casually south to eastern Ecuador, with some birds present on the Pacific and rarely Atlantic slopes of Panama, the Pacific and occasionally the Atlantic slopes of Costa Rica, the Pacific and rarely the Atlantic slopes of Nicaragua, the Pacific coast of Guatemala, central and southern Pacific slopes and occasionally southern Atlantic slopes of Mexico (Temple 2002). The Dickcissel has been recorded repeatedly throughout North America in the winter with most observations involving single birds or small flocks often found in flocks of House Sparrows at feeders or at locations where grain is available (Temple 2002).

The Dickcissel is a regular rarity in California and is not a review species for the state by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Along the west coast there are 15 accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are 6 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Dickcissel is a casual vagrant with over 20 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). There is one spring record for Juneau Alaska from May 22-23, 2004 (Gibson *et al.* 2008, West 2008). There is an exceptional record of an adult in Norway in July 29, 1981 (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Cramp and Perrins 1994).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Dickcissel is covered in all standard North American field guides. This species is fairly straight-forward to identify and shouldn't pose any problems for observers in British Columbia.

The male Dickcissel is a beautiful looking bird. The forehead and crown are yellow-green, merging with medium gray on nape and hindneck, with narrow black shaft streaks on the feathers (Temple 2002). The narrow supercilium is bright yellow, extending from base of upper mandible to above the rear of ear-coverts, and is bordered below by variegated pale gray and the white area on lore and just below eye (Temple 2002). The shorter ear-coverts are yellow-green, becoming medium gray on longer ear-coverts and darker gray along rear border of the ear-coverts (Temple 2002). The upper side of neck is a medium gray colour (Temple 2002). The malar area is bright yellow except for a small white patch at base of lower mandible and the rear malar area becomes white and broadens into a white patch on the lower side of neck (Temple 2002). The upper back and scapulars are rufous-cinnamon to buff-brown, with bold black streaks on back and narrower blackish streaks on scapulars (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The lower back, rump, and upper tail-coverts are a grayish brown colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is dark coloured and the outer web of the tail feathers are narrowly edged with pale gray or off white (Sibley 2000). The chin is white with the sides of the chin being narrowly bordered with black; the throat is black, forming a patch ending in a bib that goes onto the central uppermost area of the breast (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The sides and flanks are medium gray in colour with some yellowish or olive suffusion mixed in with the remainder of breast to upper mid-belly being a bright yellow colour that often has a small black patch on mid-breast; the remaining underparts are white in colour (Temple 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The lesser and median wing-coverts are a bright rufous chestnut colour (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The greater wing-coverts are brownish black to black in colour and are broadly margined and tipped in rufous chestnut to pale gray-buff (Temple 2002). The primaries, secondaries, tertial feathers, the primary-coverts, and the alula are brownish black to black in colour (Sibley 2000, Temple 2002). The primaries are edged in pale gray to off white on outer web; the secondaries and primary-coverts are edged in pale cinnamon-buff to gray-buff on outer web, and the tertials are tipped with rufous cinnamon to gray-buff on outer web (Temple 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The under wing-coverts and axillaries are yellow in colour; these feathers are brightest along leading edge of wing and with the longer feathers tipped grayish white (Temple 2002).

In fresh plumage, black bib-feathers of the male have narrow whitish to yellowish tips (Temple 2002). As this plumage wears and fades during the summer months, the green and yellow areas of the head fade to gray and white, the upperparts become more grayish in colour, the pale

edges on wing-feathers become narrower and grayer with less rufous colouration, the black bib may become mottled with white areas, and the yellow underparts become paler in overall colour (Temple 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The female Dickcissel's upperparts and side of neck are buff-brown that become duller and more grayish in colour when the feathers get worn, the forehead and crown have broader streaks than the adult male, with almost no green colour; the hindneck has almost no gray feathers (Temple 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The side of head is gray-brown to gray-buff in colour; the supercilium is bright yellow to pale buff in colour but becomes duller with wear; the yellow and white malar area is tinged with buff and broadens to a buffy brown in fresh plumage or to gray when the feathers are worn on side of neck (Sibley 2000, Temple 2002). The chin and throat are white, with the sides bordered by a black stripe and often a mottled black gorget crossing the lower throat connecting both ends of black stripes (Sibley 2000, Temple 2002). The side of the breast and flanks are tawny-buff coloured in fresh plumage to pale buff-gray when the feathers get worn, the breast to the center of belly is a deep ocher-yellow in fresh plumage to sulfur yellow when the feathers are worn; the remainder of the underparts are cream coloured to off white in colour (Temple 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wing and tail are like the male birds and share the same effects of wear and fading, except the lesser and median upper wing-coverts have less chestnut and more rufous cinnamon than adult male with some dull-black feather centers visible (Temple 2002). The song of the Dickcissel is a "*see see dick-dick chee chee*" or also interpreted as a "*dick dick sic sic sic*" (Beadle and Rising 2006). The call, often heard in flight, is an explosive, almost electric sounding "*bzeet*" (Beadle and Rising 2006).

The closest looking species in British Columbia to the Dickcissel is the female House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), which many vagrant birds are found with, usually at bird feeders (Campbell *et al.* 2001). The female House Sparrow is about the same size as the Dickcissel but lacks all yellow tones on the breast or rufous colours on the wings (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Dickcissel is a species that is notorious for regular seasonal movements within its primary breeding range and for irregular movements outside of this core range to breed in surrounding areas where extensive grassland habitat exists (Temple 2002). These erratic, semi-nomadic movements result in dramatic year-to-year changes in distribution and abundance, especially in peripheral and sporadically occupied areas (Temple 2002). As a result of these erratic wanderings, this species can turn up anywhere in North America and the species has a preference for secondary habitats, or agricultural landscapes (Temple 2002). In British Columbia the Dickcissel is a casual vagrant with 23 records that have been reported from all over the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). The bulk of Provincial records come from

Vancouver Island with 11 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). The interior has had the second highest number of observations with 7 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). The Lower Fraser region from Vancouver to Hope has had 3 records and there is one for the Sunshine Coast (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). The timing of these records is interesting in that 8 records are from the month of June and likely reflects birds that were overshoots or were displaced from their normal breeding range and looked for suitable habitat in British Columbia to breed (Temple 2002, Toochin *et al.* 2014a). There are no other months of the year with a high number of records except for the month of May with 4 records which likely represent spring overshoots (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). Other months such as March, April, July, August and September have only 1 record each (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). There are 2 records for the month of November and 3 records of birds that wintered in the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). The timing of these records likely reflects the incredible erratic movements and lengths that Dickcissels will go to find suitable breeding habitat (Temple 2002). Unlike in California where there is an obvious fall migration period between the months of August to November, British Columbia lacks numbers of fall records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). British Columbia is probably too far north to experience a fall migration of this species. This could change with more observer coverage in the future but the records currently show that spring and early summer is the best time to find this species and that males looking for a territory is the likely cause since the vast majority of these records are of adult male birds (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, Please see Table 1). This was the case with an adult male Dickcissel found outside of Sorrento from June 10-July 17, 2005 (Cecile 2005b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a). Though breeding was never confirmed it is highly possible given the length of the bird's stay in the area on territory (Cecile 2005b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a). Breeding has never been confirmed in British Columbia but is always possible given the nomadic nature of the species. It is very interesting to note that the first Provincial record was a pair of Dickcissels collected by Major Allan Brooks on June 12, 1922 at the east side of Vaseux Lake in the South Okanagan (Brooks 1923). This record shows that birds turning up in June have the potential to occur in pairs and even the potential to breed (Campbell *et al.* 2001). Currently there are only a few fall and winter records for the Province but most have been birds found in the company of House Sparrows coming to bird feeders (Toochin *et al.* 2014a). This seems to be the way many out of range Dickcissels are found across North America and observers should carefully watch feeders and check House Sparrows for this species.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #15: Dickcissel adult male at Sorrento on June 25, 2005. Photos © Rick Toochin.



Figure 3: Record #15: Dickcissel adult male at Sorrento on June 27, 2005. Photo © Randy Findlay.

Table 1: Records of Dickcissel for British Columbia

- 1.(2) male & female June 12, 1922: Brooks (specimen: NMC 17883) east side of Vaseux Lake, Okanagan (Brooks 1923)
- 2.(1) adult female November 14, 1960-January 14, 1961: Mr. & Mrs. Bell, and mobs (banded) Victoria (Davidson 1960, Davidson 1966, Boggs and Boggs 1961a, Boggs and Boggs 1961b, Stirling 1961)
- 3.(1) adult male June 3, 1976: Adrian Dorst (BC Photo 442) on Stubbs Island near Tofino (Crowell and Nehls 1976, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 4.(1) female August 3, 1980: Brian Kautesk: south of Vaseux Lake (Cannings *et al.* 1987, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 5.(1) immature September 26, 1982: Tim Zurowski (BC Photo 803) 1456 Courtland Ave., Saanich (Hunn and Mattocks 1983, Campbell *et al.* 2001)

- 6.(1) immature female November 22-25, 1990: Doug Brown, mobs (photo) Osoyoos
(Siddle 1991, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 7.(1) adult male May 23-24, 1993: Brian Slater, mobs (BC Photo 1812) Ucluelet
(Siddle and Bowling 1993, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 8.(1) adult male June 2-7, 1993: Aurora Patterson, mobs (photo) Tofino (Siddle 1993,
Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 9.(1) adult female May 20, 1994: Kim Herzig: 11 km east of Princeton (Davidson 1994,
Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 10.(1) adult May 30, 1998: Dean Nicholson, Ruth Goodwin, mobs: Wasa, E. Kootenay
(Bowling 1998, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 11.(1) female March 25, 1999: L. Andruss: near Chemainus (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 12.(1) adult male June 20-26, 2001: Keith Walker, Cathy Walker (photo) Francois Lake
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 13.(1) adult male June 7-8, 2002: Marilyn Chrystal, mobs (photo) 1756 Mission Road, near Davis
Bay on Sunshine Coast (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 14.(1) immature male October 13, 2004: Bryan Gates, mobs (photo) Vantreight Bulb Fields,
Central Saanich (Cecile 2005a, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 15.(1) adult singing male June 10-July 17, 2005: Ed Dahl, mobs (photo) Petersen Road, Balmoral
area, Sorrento Arm (Cecile 2005b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 16.(1) adult male May 27-28, 2006: Mary Robichaud, mobs: Jordan River (Cecile 2006,
Toochin 2012b, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 17.(1) adult male June 25, 2007: Neil Robins, mobs: near Quennell Lake, off Yellow Point Road,
Cedar (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 18.(1) adult male December 31, 2006 – January 11+, 2007: Kat Cruickshank, mobs (photo)
Pt. Alberni (Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 19.(1) adult female October 16, 2011: Rick Toochin: Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 20.(1) adult female April 20-26, 2013: Doug Bamford, mobs (photo) near Elliott St. and
Chisholm St. area, Ladner (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 21.(1) adult male June 1 & 11, 2013: Jerry McFetridge, mobs: Hope Airport
(A. Russell Pers. Comm.)
- 22.(1) immature/ female October 2, 2013: Ian Cruickshank, mobs (flight calls recorded) end of
Swanwick Road, Metchosin (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 23.(1) adult male December 28, 2013-February 23, 2014: Alex Gray, mobs (photo) Port McNeill
(P. Levesque Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) [heard only] October 9, 1999: David Allinson: RPBO, Metchosin (Shepard 2000,
Toochin *et al.* 2014b)

2.(1) immature late November, 2005: John Baumbrough: at feeder in Vernon
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

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