

Status and Occurrence of Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) is a species of passerine that is found breeding in the Western United States from the Blue Mountains of southeastern Washington; south throughout eastern and parts of central Oregon, to southwestern Idaho; east through to southwestern and south-central Montana; south throughout most of Wyoming, all of Nevada, Utah, western Colorado with birds found in the eastern part of the State, northern Texas; west through northern New Mexico, northern Arizona; west and north into California along the Sierra Nevada Mountains and across northern California, and in southern California in the Mount Pinos area south through to San Diego County (Small 1994, Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Dobbs *et al.* 2012). There is also a breeding population in Sierra San Pedro Mártir in the northern part of the Baja Peninsula (Howell and Webb 2010). There are also nest records for western Oklahoma (Downs 1983).

The Green-tailed Towhee prefers to breed at middle to high elevation, generally between 1,400 and 3,200 m (Phillips *et al.* 1964, Hayward *et al.* 1976), but as low as 750 m in California (Small 1994) and as high as 3,600–3,700 m in New Mexico and in eastern California (Dobbs *et al.* 2012).

The Green-tailed Towhee is found in the southwestern United States in the winter, but mainly south of their breeding range at lower elevations (Dobbs *et al.* 2012). Throughout the winter range the Green-tailed Towhee can be local and hard to find in some regions while being easier to find in other regions (Dobbs *et al.* 2012). This species is found from Western Texas, across southern New Mexico, southern Arizona and the southern most regions of California (Dobbs *et al.* 2012). Small numbers do winter in parts of the breeding range, but these numbers vary and it isn't every year (Dobbs *et al.* 2012). Most populations of Green-tailed Towhee that winter in the United States are found in regions where the minimum temperatures rarely drop below -7°C (Root 1988, Dobbs *et al.* 2012). The winter range of the Green-tailed Towhee also extends well south into Mexico where they are found throughout the Baja Peninsula, except for the extreme northwest corner (Howell and Webb 2010). In the rest of Mexico, the Green-tailed Towhee is found along the Pacific slope, in parts of the interior of the country south to Jalisco, as well as in Michoacán, Federal District, Puebla; and less commonly, Oaxaca, and on Atlantic slope in Tamaulipas (Howell and Webb 2010, Dobbs *et al.* 2012).

The Green-tailed Towhee is a casually occurring species north of its breeding range in Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). It is classified as an accidental vagrant in northwestern

Washington (Wahl *et al.* 2005). In British Columbia, the Green-tailed Towhee is an accidental species with just over 11 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014). It is an accidental in the rest of Canada with records from Saskatchewan, Quebec and Nova Scotia (Godfrey 1986, Dobbs *et al.* 2012). It is a casual vagrant in the Eastern United States with records scattered throughout the region (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Green-tailed Towhee is covered in all North American field guides. This is the smallest species of Towhee that naturally occurs in North America, measuring 7 ¼ inches (18 cm); whereas, the larger Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) measures at 7 ½ inches (19 cm) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is uniquely coloured and should not be difficult for observers to identify.

Adult birds have a rusty crown and a large bill that has a bluish-gray base with a dark tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a white line from the base of the bill to the dark eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat is white with a thick submoustachial stripe (Sibley 2000). The rest of the face, neck, chest and upper flanks are gray (Sibley 2000). The undertail coverts are yellowish-green (Sibley 2000). The wings are a bright yellowish-green that shows up on both the upper side and underside of the wings in flight (Sibley 2000). The rump is gray, and both sides of the tail are bright yellowish-green (Sibley 2000). The legs and feet are grayish (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

First winter birds hold this plumage from August to March (Sibley 2000). These birds are very similar to adult birds, but have a reduced reddish crown and more gray on the upper back (Beadle and Rising 2003).

Juvenile birds hold this plumage from late May to August (Sibley 2000). These birds look very different to all other plumages (Beadle and Rising 2003). The crown, face, back and breast have brownish-black streaks (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The lower breast is pale, but also has dark streaks (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings have greenish-edged feathers and two weak wing bars (Beadle and Rising 2003). The tail also has greenish edged feathers (Beadle and Rising 2003). The legs are pale as is the base of the bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The song of the Green-tailed Towhee consists of several short notes followed by two more trills (Sibley 2000). This sounds like “*tip-seeo-see-tweeeee-chchchch*”, but there can be other variations given (Sibley 2000). The call note is a nasal mewling or “*meewe*”(Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The flight call is a thin buzzy “*zeereesh*”(Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Green-tailed Towhee is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only 11 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Birds have been found throughout the Province with 1 record from Vancouver Island, 1 record from the Sunshine Coast, 4 from the Vancouver area, and 5 from the interior region (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The pattern of vagrancy shows birds turn up most frequently in May (3 records) are likely Spring overshoots (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). This time pattern perfectly coincides with birds that are arriving on their breeding grounds in Oregon and Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). It is likely more records in the future will occur at this time of year (Campbell *et al.* 2001). The most records in the Province are from July (4 records) and are likely non-breeding birds that have dispersed from the south or birds that overshoot in the Spring and remained in the region during the Summer, only to become failed breeders (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). This species is extremely rare in the fall in British Columbia with only 1 confirmed record (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). This bird was observed at the Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary in Ladner from September 9-13, 2002, and coincided with a July 7, 2002, observation from the Lillooet area (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). It is impossible to know if these records refer to the same bird, but certainly is a huge coincidence. Even though the Green-tailed Towhee likes to travel far south for the winter there are 2 winter records from British Columbia. The first Provincial record was found in Fauquier in the interior and stayed for a short period from December 9-13, 1974 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). The other winter record is the only confirmed record from Vancouver Island of a long staying bird in Comox from November 10, 1984- February 28, 1985 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). It is highly likely another Green-tailed Towhee could be found in the winter in the Province again in the future since they have been found in Eastern North America during the winter months and have survived the cold at bird feeders (Dobbs *et al.* 2012). The Green tailed Towhee is a species that is possible anywhere in British Columbia, and should be looked for by keen observers in the future. There is suitable breeding habitat in the Fraser Canyon for this species, but to date it is unrecorded in that region (R. Toochin Pers. Obs). With climate change and birds slowly moving north of their established breeding ranges over the past few decades, it is possible that this species will not only be found again in the future, but might be found breeding.



Figure 1: Record #5: Green-tailed Towhee at Glenn Valley in Langley on June 7, 1997.
Photo © Chris Buis.

Table 1: Records of Green-tailed Towhee for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult December 9-13, 1974: L. Bumpus : on the east side of Arrow Lakes, Fauquier (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) adult November 10, 1984- February 28, 1985: Mrs. Edrian Bowen, mobs (BC Photo 996) Comox (Hunn and Mattocks 1985, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 3.(1) adult May 21-22, 1993: Gerry Ansel, WA, SA, mobs (BC Photo 1527) Queen Elizabeth Pk., Vancouver (Davidson 1994, Dorsey 1996b, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 4.(1) adult May 26, 1996: Doug Brown, mobs: Wilson Creek, Sunshine Coast (Bowling 1996c, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 5.(1) adult male June 3-7, 1997: Nanny Mulder-ten Kate, Chris Buis, Rick Toochin, Tom Plath, Stu Holwill, mobs (BC Photo 1782) Glen Valley, Langley (Bowling 1997c, Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 6.(1) adult July 7, 2002: Henry Davis: beside the Cayoosh School, Lillooet (Cecile 2002c, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 7.(1) adult fall plumage September 9-13, 2002: Bob Sundstrom, mobs (photo) Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Cecile 2003a, Toochin 2012a)
- 8.(1) adult July 3, 2003: Stan and Carol Gosche: “7” Mountain at sign 10, Golden (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 9.(1) adult July 8, 2008: Marlene Johnston, mobs (photo) Lardeau (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 10.(1) adult May 28-29, 2009: Doug Brown: Osoyoos (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 11.(1) adult July 10, 2013: Lee Harding: Burnaby Mountain Park, Burnaby (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult July 28, 2009: David Allinson: Tower Point section of Witty's Lagoon Regional Park, Metchosin (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 2.(1) adult fall plumage September 26, 2013: *fide* Vancouver Rare Bird Alert: Camosun Bog, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Green-tailed Towhee records in British Columbia:

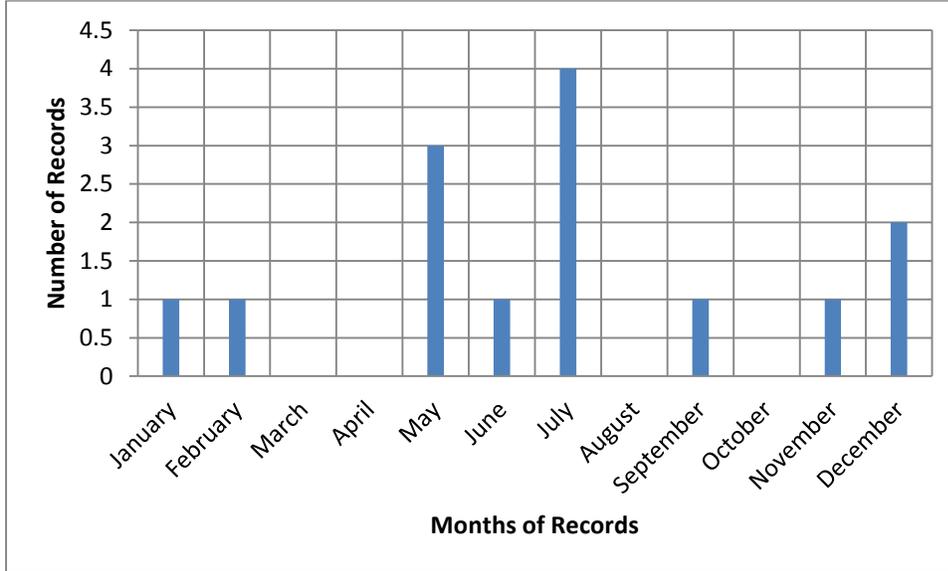


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the Spring and Summer months with May and July having the highest number of records.

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