

Status and Occurrence of the Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) in British Columbia .
By Rick Toochin

Introduction and Distribution

The Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) is an eastern species that breeds from southern Saskatchewan south through North Dakota, eastern Montana, eastern Wyoming, eastern Colorado, and eastern New Mexico south into northern Mexico, across to Texas, along the Gulf States to northern Florida, north to southern Maine and west Massachusetts, through New York State, into southern Ontario across Minnesota into southern Manitoba (Farrand 1983, Godfrey 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The winter range of the Orchard Oriole is from southern Mexico through Central America to Columbia and Venezuela (Farrand 1983, Godfrey 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001). The Orchard Oriole is a vagrant found regularly in both spring and fall in Atlantic Canada (Godfrey 1986, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This eastern species is becoming a regular vagrant to the western states and provinces (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Orchard Oriole has become an annual species in California and, as of 1973, is no longer a review species in the State (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are 8 accepted records for the Orchard Oriole for Oregon, 6 accepted records for Washington, 1 accepted record for Alaska and 7 records for British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Wahl *et al.* 2005, West 2008, Heint and Piston 2009, OFO 2012, WRBC 2012, Toochin *et al.* 2013). The Orchard Oriole occurs as a casual species in British Columbia with the likelihood of future records with more observer awareness and coverage.

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Orchard Oriole is covered in all North American field guides. The Orchard Oriole is a small bird more the size of a Western Tanager (Sibley 2000). This oriole species has a thin pointed bill and a short tail with a rounded tip (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). An interesting behaviour observed in Orchard Orioles is that of jerking their tails around in a side to side motion (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2000).

Adult males are easily identified by their dark chestnut breast, undertail coverts and rump (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head, throat and upper back are black (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The coloration of the adult male is unique to this species of North American Oriole (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are black with a thin white wing bar and white edges to the tertial feathers and dark chestnut on the upper scapulars of the upper wing and axillaries on the underside of the wing (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are gray in coloration and the tail is all black in color (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult females and first fall birds are very similar looking in appearance (Farrand 1983, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Females have a greenish-olive wash to the head and neck and rump with yellow tones (Farrand 1983, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The entire underside (including the undertail coverts) of the female Orchard Oriole is bright yellow with greenish-olive tones (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The small bill is pale on the lower mandible and thin and pointed in shape (Sibley 2000). The eyes are dark in coloration (Sibley 2000). The legs and feet are gray in color (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back is grayish and so are the wings with two well-defined wing bars and gray edged tertials (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The axillaries are white with dark secondaries and primaries on the underside of the wing (Sibley 2000). The tail is olive-yellow on both the underside and upper side with a typical oriole rounded feathers at the tail tip (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

First fall male birds are almost identical to female birds but have a darker upper mandible and develop a black throat with some chestnut feathers during the bird's first winter (Farrand 1983, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Orchard Oriole's song is a rich lively warbling "pli-titi-zheer" with the common call being a low soft "chat" sometimes given in slow chatter (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The flight call of the Orchard Oriole is a soft whistled "yeeep" (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

In British Columbia, the Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*) is also a vagrant species with 15 Provincial records which are all believed to involve the western subspecies (*I. c. nelsoni*). This subspecies occurs from Northern California south to Nevada, Arizona, southern New Mexico and part of northern Baja California and north western Mexico (Sibley 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Toochin *et al.* 2013). Hooded Oriole records have been increasing since the early 1980's in Oregon where it is no longer on the State Review List and also in Washington State where there are 7 accepted records (Roberson 1980, OFO 2012, Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2012). It is likely there will be more found in the Province in the future and this species should be ruled out for any odd looking female oriole that is encountered by observers. In the western subspecies of the Hooded Oriole, (*I. c. nelsoni*), adult males are very straight-forward to identify and are covered in standard North American Field guides. The female and immature Hooded Oriole (*I. c. nelsoni*) can look very similar to Orchard Oriole but have a few important structural differences. Hooded Orioles have a longer well curved bill, is a larger bodied bird that has a longer tail to all Orchard Orioles (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is vital for observers to carefully determine the overall bill, tail and body size is of any bird that is not an adult male (Roberson 1980). The adult female Hooded Oriole is slightly smaller than a Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) or Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) in body size but is quite a bit bigger when compared to an Orchard Oriole (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In plumage markings, the female and the first fall

birds are gray on the back of the neck and down the back with gray flanks (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The face, throat, central belly and undertail coverts are yellow (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are dark and the bill is long, curved and pale on the lower mandible (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are gray with pale edged wing coverts, primary edges and tertail edges (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is long and dark olive-green in color (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are gray in coloration (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The first winter male Hooded Orioles develop their black throats during the winter months (Sibley 2000). The overall coloration and plumage characteristics are like the females until the first spring when birds acquire more orange tones to the yellow plumage (Sibley 2000). The song of Hooded Oriole is a series of whistles, trills and rattles (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The calls of the Hooded Oriole include a distinctive whistled rising “wheet” (Sibley 2000). The flight call of the Hooded Oriole is a sharp, rising metallic “veek” (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Both the Bullock’s Oriole and Baltimore Oriole are significantly different in size and coloration from Orchard Oriole and should not cause observers any identification issues (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Both of these species are covered in standard North American Field Guides and are should be easy to identify.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Orchard Oriole is predominantly an eastern species that does wander into western North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In California, the Orchard Oriole is a regular fall migrant in the State with earliest records starting in mid-July. This arrival date incredibly falls into the time frame when some early departing birds arrive on the wintering grounds (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Most California records fall into the period from August 12 – December 22 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The numbers of Orchard Oriole records in the State peaks from late September through October (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Spring records are rarer in the State with dates ranging from March 17 – early July (Hamilton *et al.* 2007).

British Columbia’s records reflect similar timing as the California records (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The three spring records for British Columbia occurred in late May which is similar timing to other eastern vagrants such as eastern warblers that occur in the late May early June time period in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2013). In the fall, birds have occurred in British Columbia from August through to October which is when this species shows up in California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). To date, all British Columbia records have been of single birds on their own or loosely associating with migrant passerine flocks. Orchard Oriole’s prefer open habitat such as orchards, shade trees and woodland edges that provide insects and fruit (Farrand 1983). They are often found in habitat

where plants bear that form part of their diet (Farrand 1983, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). A female bird found by the author in Sooke on August 6, 2009 was found feeding in a plum tree (Toochin 2012a, please see Table 1). Another recent record of an adult female was found by the author at the Hope Airport on May 26, 2010 and was feeding in a mountain ash tree (Toochin 2012b, please see Table 1). The most recent record was of a female bird found by John Purves at the French Creek Marina in the Parksville area from September 3-5, 2010 (please see Table 1). It was incorrectly published in *North American Birds* as a male but instead was a female plumaged bird (Charlesworth 2011). In the future, known vagrant traps should be checked for this species and all fall Orioles should be given extra scrutiny by observers. Given this species regularity in California and increasing occurrence in Oregon and Washington, it is a good candidate to be found again in the future in British Columbia.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #7: Orchard Oriole female at French Creek, near Parksville on September 4, 2010. Photos © John Purves.

Table 1: British Columbia records of Orchard Oriole:

- 1.(1) immature male May 22, 1997: R.B. Weeden, and other observers: Northern Saltspring Island (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) immature male May 30, 1997: W. Fletcher: Sidney near Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 3.(1) immature female October 10, 2003: Jukka Jantunen, Amelie Rousseau: Tower Point, near Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) adult female August 6, 2007: Rick Toochin: Sooke (Toochin 2012a)
- 5.(1) immature October 3, 2009: Rich Mooney, and other observers: (photo) Tofino (Charlesworth 2010, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 6.(1) adult female May 26, 2010: Rick Toochin: Hope Airport (Toochin 2012b)
- 7.(1) second year female September 3-5, 2010: John Purves, and other observers (photo) French Creek Marina, Parksville (Charlesworth 2011)

Hypothetical Records:

1.(1) adult singing male July 1965: R. D. Harris: Duck Lake, Creston (Harris *et al.* 1965, Butler *et al.* 1986)

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