

**Status and Occurrence of Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)
in British Columbia. By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2018.**

Introduction and Distribution

The Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) is one of the most spectacular woodpecker species found in North America (Gorman 2014). This species is local and sporadically found throughout its range (Frei *et al.* 2017). The Red-headed Woodpecker is found breeding in Canada from southern Saskatchewan where it is rare (Smith 1996b), locally found in southern Manitoba (Godfrey 1986), it is rare to uncommon in the summer in Ontario north to Kenora, Wawa, and Sudbury (James 1991c), and extreme southern Quebec in areas bordering the lower St. Lawrence River (Lemieux 1996c).

In the United States, the Red-headed Woodpecker is found in the west from Montana east of the Rocky Mountains (Montana Bird Distribution Committee 1996), north-central and eastern third of Wyoming (Oakleaf *et al.* 1992), throughout Nebraska except for treeless areas in the west (Johnsgard 1979a), eastern Colorado (Andrews and Righter 1992, Melcher 1998a), and northern New Mexico in the Rio Grande and Pecos valleys (Ligon 1961). The Red-headed Woodpecker is found locally in eastern New Mexico west to Union County and the Pecos River valley from Roswell to Fort Sumner (Frei *et al.* 2017).

The Red-headed Woodpecker formerly occurred as a rare summer visitor in the Uinta Basin of Utah (Hayward *et al.* 1976a). This species was reported as breeding there (Behle and Perry 1975, Hayward *et al.* 1976a), but breeding never confirmed (Behle *et al.* 1985). The current status of the Red-headed Woodpecker is unclear, but it is probably still a rare summer visitor (Frei *et al.* 2017). In North Dakota, this species is found from the mid-west from south-western, central, and eastern part of the state (Stewart 1975b), and most of Minnesota except for the north-eastern portion (Janssen 1987). The Red-headed Woodpecker is more common in southern and central Wisconsin (Frei *et al.* 2017) and the Lower Peninsula of Michigan (Frei *et al.* 2017), and is scarce on the Upper Peninsula and in northern Wisconsin (Pitcher 1991c, Robbins 1991).

In the Eastern United States, the Red-headed Woodpecker is a local sporadic breeder in west-central Massachusetts, but rarely east to Martha's Vineyard (Veit and Petersen 1993, Frei *et al.* 2017), but only casually to Connecticut (Zeranski and Baptist 1990); practically throughout New York and this includes portions of Long Island, except Adirondack Mountains and Catskills and associated mountain ranges (Spahn 1988). The species has nearly disappeared as a breeding bird in Vermont (Renfrew 2013b). In New Jersey, the Red-headed Woodpecker is a very rare breeder in the north--western portion of the state, in the pine-barrens, and Cape May County

(Walsh *et al.* 1999b). This species breeds almost throughout Pennsylvania, but largely absent from the northeast and extreme southeast parts of the state (Schutsky 1992b). The Red-headed Woodpecker is locally found in the non-mountainous areas along the entire periphery of West Virginia, except part of the western region (Hall 1983, Bucklew and Hall 1994). This species is rare in Delaware (Hess *et al.* 2000b), but found throughout Maryland (Wilmot 1996), and in Virginia and Carolinas east of the high mountains (Stupka 1963, Potter *et al.* 1980, Frei *et al.* 2017), but is less common on coast (Sprunt 1970). The Red-headed Woodpecker is rare or absent in the extreme eastern mountains of Tennessee and southeastern Kentucky and the Cumberland Plateau (Palmer-Ball 1996, Nicholson 1997b). This species is found throughout most of Georgia, but less so in the northeastern mountains (Burleigh 1958).

In the southern United States, the Red-headed Woodpecker is a fairly common breeding resident throughout most of northern and central Florida, and is more common inland than on coast, but absent from extreme south and the Keys (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b, Frei *et al.* 2017). It is locally common in most of Alabama (Imhof 1976) and Mississippi (Toups and Jackson 1987), and uncommon to fairly common in north and central Louisiana, but not in extreme southern coastal areas (Frei *et al.* 2017), throughout eastern Texas west to Wichita, Limestone, Victoria, and Calhoun counties in southeastern Texas and throughout all, but the westernmost Texas Panhandle, but absent from the immediate coast (Oberholser 1974c, Rappole and Blacklock 1985, Pulich 1988b, Frei *et al.* 2017).

The Red-headed Woodpecker is found in a variety of treed habitats, typically with a certain degree of openness and the presence of dead limbs or snags for nesting purposes (Frei *et al.* 2017). Commonly, this may include: deciduous woodlands, especially with beech or oak (Reller 1972), lowland and upland habitats, river bottoms, open woods, groves of dead and dying trees, orchards, parks, golf courses, open agricultural country, savanna-like grasslands with scattered trees, and the forest edge and along roadsides (Degraff *et al.* 1980, Kahl *et al.* 1985, Hamel 1992, Rodewald *et al.* 2005).

During the spring, migrants may appear in northern areas as early as March in Minnesota (Roberts 1932c) or as late as May in South Dakota (Pettingill 1965), Iowa (Dinsmore *et al.* 1984), and Pennsylvania (Todd 1940). The Red-headed Woodpecker is rarely seen in the spring in New England, eastern New York (Bull 1964), and New Jersey (Leck 1984), but at Cape May, New Jersey, migrants average 5 birds per spring and have been observed passing Cape Island, from April 23–June 1 (Sibley 1997). Spring migration in New York appears to be largely inland, while fall migration appears to include the coast (Bull 1964). The Red-headed Woodpecker migrates along shorelines of Lake Erie in Ohio (Peterjohn 1989b), Lake Michigan near Chicago (Mlodinow 1984), and Lake Superior in northeastern Minnesota (Janssen 1987).

The Red-headed Woodpecker generally begins leaving the northern breeding areas by the latter part of August with fall migration peaking during mid-September and ending by mid-October to early November (Roberts 1932c, Todd 1940, Pettingill 1965, Dinsmore *et al.* 1984, Robbins and Easterla 1992). This species often leaves the northern and western portions of its range in the fall, but yearly dynamics are greatly influenced by the abundance of hard mast (Zimmerman 1993b), such that individuals linger north and west in some years and move south and east in others (Smith 1986d). Individuals may also stop migrating and remain in an area for the winter when large hard-mast crops are encountered in the fall (Smith 1986d).

Generally withdraws from northern range in the winter into the Midwest (Bock and Lepthien 1975a), but yearly dynamics greatly influenced by the abundance of hard mast such as acorns and beechnuts (Frei *et al.* 2017). Red-headed Woodpecker numbers can vary widely where birds may be common one year and absent the next at a given location (Smith and Scarlett 1987). During most years, this species winters from Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992), eastern Kansas, southern and eastern Iowa, southeastern Minnesota, south-central Wisconsin, southern Michigan, extreme southern Ontario, western New York, western and central Pennsylvania, and Maryland south through remainder of its breeding range, with some individuals overwintering outside of the breeding range west to central Texas (Frei *et al.* 2017). The Red-headed Woodpecker occurs irregularly farther north within its breeding range where it is rare and this includes areas such as southern Saskatchewan or southern Manitoba (Godfrey 1986, Smith 1996b), or outside current breeding range from southern New England (Veit and Petersen 1993) to Delaware (Hess *et al.* 2000b). Occasionally this species will be found in the winter in eastern Colorado into foothills to 2,400 m, and rarely west of Continental Divide (Andrews and Righter 1992). The Red-headed Woodpecker is found in some years on the Texas coast (Rappole and Blacklock 1985), casual in southern Louisiana (Frei *et al.* 2017) and southern Alabama (Imhof 1976), and rare in extreme southern Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b). Occasionally, breeding Red-headed Woodpeckers on Mississippi Gulf Coast disappear in the fall and return in the spring (Toups and Jackson 1987), suggesting they move inland during winter months (Frei *et al.* 2017).

The Red-headed Woodpecker has been recorded 5 times in Texas along American side of Mexican border with a first-year individual at Rancho Viejo in Cameron County from February 17–April 24, 1999 (Frei *et al.* 2017), 2 sightings in Big Bend National Park in Brewster County (Wauer 1973), an immature bird near El Paso, October 17-19, 1982, and an adult near Fabens in southern El Paso County from May 17–July 18, 1992 (Paton and Zimmer 1995). This species has been seen 3 times in southern Doña Ana County, New Mexico (Paton and Zimmer 1995), but remains unreported from Mexico (Howell and Web 2010, Frei *et al.* 2017).

The Red-headed Woodpecker may migrate south of Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992a). There are 2 reports of this species flying over the Gulf of Mexico during the fall migration in October with the first found 120 km south of Cameron, Louisiana, in 1976 (Frei *et al.* 2017) and 80 km west of Clearwater, Florida, in 1977 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b). There is 1 sight record from Bermuda on November 17, 1904 (Amos 1991).

In the western states and provinces, the Red-headed Woodpecker has occurred mostly in the summer months (Frei *et al.* 2017). In Idaho, there is 1 record from June 25, 1957 (Burleigh 1972) as well as 6 other accepted records by the Idaho Bird Records Committee (IBRC 2017). In Arizona, there are records from June 1894 (Phillips *et al.* 1964a) and late July 1996 (Benesh and Rosenberg 1996). In Alberta, the Red-headed Woodpecker is a rare vagrant species that mostly occurs from the spring through fall months (Godfrey 1986, Semenchuk 1992). Extra-limital overwintering records from the western United States include single individuals near Santa Barbara, California, from September 1988 through April 1989 (Lehman 1994b) and in a pecan (*Carya illinoensis*) grove in Marana, Arizona, from late October 1997 through early May 1998 (Benesh and Rosenberg 1998). In Canada, the Red-headed Woodpecker is an occasional winter visitor in southern Manitoba and southern Ontario, and is rare and irregular in Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and southern Alberta (Godfrey 1986, Cyr and Larivée 1995). Winter sightings usually involve individuals visiting feeding sites in urban areas as well as agricultural areas (Cyr and Larivée 1995, Page 1996).

Along the west coast the Red-headed Woodpecker is an accidental vagrant. In California, there are 5 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, the Red-headed Woodpecker is accidental with a single accepted record by the Oregon Bird Records Committee from Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County on June 21, 1987 (Rogers 1987a, OFO 2016). There are no accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee for Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, there are 6 records for the province (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Red-headed Woodpecker is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a medium-sized woodpecker measuring 23 cm in length, with a wingspan of 43 cm, and weighing 72 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Red-headed Woodpecker is easily identifiable by its completely red hood on adult birds (Frei *et al.* 2017). The full red head in combination with the white wing-patch in the secondaries, found on birds at all ages, distinguish the Red-headed Woodpecker from all other similarly-sized North American woodpeckers (Frei *et al.* 2017). In British Columbia, the Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) can cause confusion with the Red-headed Woodpecker although the

sapsucker is a common woodpecker species in coastal forests and in selected areas of the interior (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). Although the Red-breasted Sapsucker is superficially similar looking to an adult Red-headed Woodpecker, it is important to remember that the sapsucker has white or buff patterning on the back and blackish barring on the flanks (Sibley 2000). Like the Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), the Red-headed Woodpecker will often fly out and hawk for large flying insects (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult birds are unmistakable, with a crimson red hood over entire head, neck, throat, and upper breast, contrasting with snowy-white underparts and black upperparts that have a slightly greenish or bluish sheen (Frei *et al.* 2017). The red head is demarcated by narrow black collar across breast (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The large white patch is visible on the secondaries and tertials at rest and in flight (Sibley 2000). The rump and uppertail coverts are also white (Sibley 2000). The tail is black with the outermost rectrices white and there is also some white at the base and on the outer webs of the succeeding inward pairs of feathers (Frei *et al.* 2017). The bill is bluish-white or light gray, becoming darker, more lead-coloured terminally (Frei *et al.* 2017). The iris is dark-brown or reddish-brown in adult birds (Frei *et al.* 2017). The legs and feet are olive gray (Sibley 2000). The Sexes are monomorphic (Frei *et al.* 2017).

Immature birds are distinguishable in their first fall and winter by having a head, neck, and upper breast varying from entirely grayish-brown to crimson-red with little or no brown colouration (Frei *et al.* 2017). The secondaries are white, with a black sub-terminal band (Sibley 2000). The under-parts are whitish, with variable amounts of dusky streaking, especially on the flanks (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

On juvenile birds the plumage is held from June–October (Frei *et al.* 2017). The dark areas on the back are brownish-black (Frei *et al.* 2017). The iris is grayish or grayish-brown (Frei *et al.* 2017).

Calls include a rapid, repeated, 5-8, sharp, feisty, squealing or cawing “*quiirr*”, “*queeerk*”, “*queer*” or “*kweer*”, sometimes a “*kwi-ir*”, particularly when breeding (Gorman 2014). Also gives a weak, wheezing “*queeah*” or “*queerp*” and a soft, dry rattling “*krrrrrr*” contact calls (Gorman 2014). In flight, gives a low-pitched “*chug*” call note (Gorman 2014).

Any Red-headed Woodpecker should be fairly straightforward to identify, if encountered in British Columbia.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Red-headed Woodpecker is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 6 records, all coming from the interior of the province (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first record of this species was an adult male and female found by John and James Macoun at Pass Creek near Robson on June 25, 1890 (Macoun and Macoun 1909). The second record was an adult found by James Grant and was photographed (Royal BC Museum Photo 207) near Lavington, 13 km east of Vernon from July 11-13, 1965 (Rogers 1965, Grant 1966). The third record for British Columbia was an immature found south of Tatla Lake on September 18, 1978 (Roberson 1980). The fourth record was an adult found by T. Kinley near Skookumchuk in the East Kootenay on June 18, 1989 (Kinley 1989). The fifth record for British Columbia was an adult found and photographed by Renee Franken and Cameron Gillies while conducting woodpecker surveys near Fairmount Hot Springs, in the East Kootenay on June 22, 1998 (Franken and Gillies 2001). The sixth record for the province was found and photographed by Darlene and Darryl Cancellière 12 km east of Revelstoke on September 10, 2017 (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). There were anywhere from 1-3 birds reported in the area and these birds were photographed that same day and seen by others (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). Unfortunately, despite extensive looking the next day, these birds were gone (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.).

There is a hypothetical record of an adult reported by Beth Hunter at Cook Street off Hart Highway, near Hart Wheel Inn, Prince George on June 2, 2000 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). Upon further investigation it is likely this record was in fact a Red-breasted Sapsucker (J. Bowling Pers. Comm.).

Records of Red-headed Woodpecker in the west follow a particular pattern of occurrence with most records occurring in the summer months from June and July (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Frei *et al.* 2017). The September records for the province are interesting as there are far fewer fall records for the Red-headed Woodpecker than summer records anywhere in the west (Frei *et al.* 2017). This species does tend to wander and should be anticipated showing up again in the future in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Record #6: Red-headed Woodpecker (1 of 3) at about 12 km east of Revelstoke on September 10, 2017. Photo © Dusty Veideman.

Table 1: Records of Red-headed Woodpecker for British Columbia:

- 1.(2) adult male & female June 25, 1890: John and James Macoun Pass Creek near Robson (Macoun and Macoun 1909)
- 2.(1) adult July 11-13, 1965: James Grant (RBCM Photo 207) near Lavington, 13 km east of Vernon (Rogers 1965, Grant 1966)
- 3.(1) immature September 18, 1978: south of Tatla Lake (Roberson 1980)
- 4.(1) adult June 18, 1989: T. Kinley: near Skookumchuk in the East Kootenay (Kinley 1989)
- 5.(1) adult June 22, 1998: Renee Franken, Cameron Gillies (photo) near Fairmount Hot Springs, East Kootenay (Franken and Gillies 2001)
- 6.(2) adults September 10, 2017: Darlene and Darryl Cancellière, mobs (photo) 12 km east of Revelstoke (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult June 2, 2000: Beth Hunter: at Cook Street off Hart Highway, near Hart Wheel Inn, Prince George (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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