

Status and Occurrence of Virginia's Warbler (*Oreothlypis virginiae*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin, Paul Baker and David Baker. Submitted April 15, 2018.

Introduction and Distribution

The Virginia's Warbler (*Oreothlypis virginiae*) is a small passerine that is found breeding in open ravines or canyons, in flat mountain-valley bottoms, or on steep arid mountain slopes between 2,000-3,000 m in elevation intermixed with various growth of Pinyon Pines (*Pinus spp.*), Yellow Pines (*Pinus spp.*), Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), Junipers (*Juniperus spp.*), Gambel Oak (*Quercus gambelii*), and Aspen (*Populus spp.*) (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999). The Virginia's Warbler ranges from southeastern Idaho, from about Twin Falls County, northeast to Bingham County (Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999). This species breeds in Wyoming, locally in both the extreme southwest and eastern-central portions of the state (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999). The Virginia's Warbler also breeds in Nevada, locally throughout the eastern three-fourths of the state, and very locally in west-central Nevada around Reno and in the Pine Nut and Virginia Ranges (Olson and Martin 1999). In Utah, this species is a widespread breeder in the eastern two-thirds of the state, but very local in the western third (Olson and Martin 1999). In Colorado, the Virginia's Warbler breeds locally throughout the western two-thirds of the state, mostly west of the eastern plains (Kingery 1998b). In California, the species breeds locally in eastern California in Clark, Kingston, New York, and the White Mountains, and on the eastern slopes of the central Sierra Nevada in Mono and Inyo Counties (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999). Other local populations also occur in the San Bernardino Mountains, San Gabriel Mountains, and occasionally elsewhere in southern California (Johnson 1976b). In Arizona, the Virginia's Warbler breeds locally at scattered locations throughout all, but the south-western portion of the state, but most notably along the Mogollon Rim of central and south-eastern Arizona (Phillips *et al.* 1964a). In New Mexico, this species breeds in the mountains in the northern portion of the state, along the Mogollon Rim in the southwest, and locally at other scattered locations in central and western New Mexico (Goguen and Mathews 1998), but more widespread in the southwest ranges than previously described, occurring in the Magdalena and Caballo Mountains, throughout the Black Range, and in any appropriate habitat in the Gila Wilderness (Olson and Martin 1999). In Texas, the Virginia's Warbler breeds in the Guadalupe and Davis Mountains (Peterson *et al.* 1991).

Recently a new breeding population has been found and documented in the Black Hills of South Dakota (Palmer 1998, Swanson *et al.* 2000), this new population has extended this species range well over 200 km to the northeast. Other isolated breeding populations may still remain yet to be discovered (Olson and Martin 1999). There is growing evidence and speculation that breeding may occur in suitable habitat in south-eastern Oregon (Gilligan *et al.* 1994).

The Virginia's Warbler is a medium-distance migrant with most birds following the mountain valleys and foothills between the breeding and wintering grounds (Curson *et al.* 1994). Birds leave wintering grounds and start heading north to breeding areas in March (Curson *et al.* 1994) and arrive late on breeding grounds from late April to early June (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999); there can be considerable variation on arrival dates (Olson and Martin 1999). Late spring departures from wintering grounds are reported in Bent (1953b) who notes that there are late spring departures from the wintering grounds with an example of a late departure date of May 10. The Virginia's Warbler appears in the low-elevation foothills in southern Arizona well before that with extreme dates varying from March 23 into the month of May (Olson and Martin 1999). This species is noted as passing through northern Arizona between the dates of April 5-May 10 (Phillips *et al.* 1964a). It migrates through Texas from late April-mid-May (Oberholser 1974c) and in the more northerly reaches of its range of Nevada and Utah between April 20-5 May 5 (Bent 1953b). In Colorado, the Virginia's Warbler arrives during the last third of April (Kingery 1998b) and arrives in Wyoming by May 10 (Dorn and Dorn 1990). This species is a rare migrant in the interior of southern California between mid-April through to early June, and is a very rare migrant vagrant along the California coast north to Santa Barbara County (Small 1994).

By late July, the Virginia's Warbler becomes difficult to detect on breeding grounds, likely due to dispersing to lower elevations before the onset of migration (Olson and Martin 1999). The fall migration generally occurs from mid-August-early October, mainly through the southern mountains of New Mexico and Arizona (Bailey 1928b, Phillips *et al.* 1964a) and well east of lower Colorado River valley (Rosenberg *et al.* 1991). The species generally leaves Wyoming in August-September (Dorn and Dorn 1990). The Virginia's Warbler is a common migrant in parts of the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, with extreme passage dates of August 21-September 24, but uncommon as far east as Amarillo and Midland Counties (Oberholser 1974c). This species moves through northern Arizona from July 29-September 25 (Phillips *et al.* 1964a). The Virginia's Warbler passes as a migrant through Oklahoma yet not known to breed there (Sutton 1967b). It has been recorded in Morton County in Kansas (Bailey and Neidrach 1965). The Virginia's Warbler is found as a migrant in the fall in coastal California and Texas (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species is classified as a rare to very uncommon migrant along the southern coast of California from late August to early October and as a very rare, but annual migrant along the northern coast and in the southern interior of the state (Small 1994). This species has been recorded in mid-September from San Clemente Island (Jorgensen and Ferguson 1984); and numerous on Farallon Islands from May 13 to 28 and from August 16 to November 2 (Pyle and Henderson 1991).

In Mexico, both the fall and spring migration of this species occurs mainly along the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Central Plateau at medium elevations (Howell and Webb 2010). The Virginia's Warbler moves through the north-eastern corner of the Sonora, generally at <1,000 m elevation with the extreme dates of occurrence falling between August 21-September 26 for fall migration, and March 17-May 14 for the spring migration period (Olson and Martin 1999). It should be noted that the Virginia's Warbler generally avoids the coastal regions in migration (Russell and Monson 1998).

The Virginia's Warbler is found in the winter mainly in mountainous regions of the southwestern Mexico states of Jalisco, México, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Morelos, Guerrero, southern Puebla, and the interior of Oaxaca (Bent 1953b, Winker *et al.* 1992f, Howell and Webb 2010).

In North America, it has been recorded in winter at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, in Cameron County, Texas, and in Santa Ana, Texas (Oberholser 1974c, Lasley and Sexton 1991c), and throughout southern California in locations such as Stanislaus, Monterey, and Santa Barbara Counties (McCaskie 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1988b, Yee *et al.* 1993b).

In Eastern North America, the Virginia's Warbler is an accidental vagrant with documented records from many Provinces and States (Olson and Martin 1999). There are a several records of Virginia's Warbler from Eastern Canada (Olson and Martin 1999). The most records come from Ontario where the first record was photographed at Point Pelee on May 16, 1958, with another bird photographed there on May 10, 1974, with a valid sight record from Point Pelee in May 1975 (Godfrey 1986), an immature bird was banded and photographed at Thunder Cape Bird Observatory in Thunder Bay on August 29, 2001 (Roy 2002), and an adult male was found at Port Lambton on May 14, 2003 (Crins 2004). There is a single record for Nova Scotia from White's Lake near Halifax on November 19-20, 1994 (Mactavish 1996). There are a couple of records for Newfoundland and Labrador with the first at Goose Bay on September 21-22, 1994 (Mactavish 1996), and a more recent record was a bird photographed at the base of the White Hills, near Quidi Vidi Lake in St. John's between November 14 – December 2, 2013 (Clarke 2017). There is also a recent photographed record a bird caught by a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) from New Brunswick in Moncton on January 9, 2016 (Gallant 2016).

There are scattered records throughout the Eastern United States (Olson and Martin 1999). The highest number of records comes from Maine with 4 state records, all from an offshore vagrant trap found on Monhegan Island (MBRC 2017), there are also 2 records from New Jersey (Leck 1984), there are 2 records from New York State (Swick 2012, Swick 2016), a single record from Maryland (2012), a single record from Rhode Island (Ellison and Martin 2007), also a single record from West Virginia (Fazio and Wiltraut 2007), and 2 records from Georgia (Davis 1998,

GBRC 2010). The Virginia's Warbler is also an accidental in north-central North America with records recorded from Illinois (Craves 1994), Missouri (Peterjohn 1987b) and 2 records for Michigan (Granlund 1993, Svingen 2007), and sight record from Wisconsin (Frank 2008). This species has also been found outside its normal migration corridors in south-eastern Texas and south-western Louisiana (Olson and Martin 1999).

The Virginia's Warbler has also been recorded as a vagrant in northern Baja California (Olson and Martin 1999, Belize (Howell *et al.* 1992b), northern Guatemala (Beavers *et al.* 1991), and on March 8, 1993 on Grand Bahama Island (Smith *et al.* 1994).

Along the west coast of North America, vagrants of this species have been found primarily in Oregon during the spring and fall migration well outside their normal range (OFO 2016). There are 14 accepted records of Virginia's Warbler for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2016). There are currently no accepted records of this species for Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, the Virginia's Warbler is an accidental vagrant with a few well-documented sight records (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Virginia's Warbler is covered in most North American field guides. This is a small species measuring 12 cm in length, with a wingspan of 19 cm, and weighs 7.8 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Virginia's Warbler is closely related to the Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*) that is found commonly throughout the interior of British Columbia and is a casual species in the Peace River Region (Sibley 2000). The Virginia's Warbler and the western subspecies of the Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla ridgwayi*), considered by some authorities to be a separate species, bob their tails constantly (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). It should be noted that the eastern, nominate subspecies of Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla ruficapilla*), does not bob its tail and has different body measurements, prefers slightly different breeding habitat and a different song to the western subspecies (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Nashville Warbler is about the same size as a Virginia's Warbler and is a closely related measuring 12 cm in length, with a wingspan of 19 cm, and weighs 8.7 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Virginia's Warbler in all plumages is incredibly pale gray and lacks a bright yellow breast and belly, greenish wings, and bluish gray head found in all ages of the Nashville Warbler (Sibley 2000). The Virginia's Warbler is a very obvious looking species and should not pose any difficulty for keen observers if encountered. The following description is taken from Dunn and Garrett (1997).

Adult breeding plumaged males have a clear, clean gray head with a bold white eye-ring and a pale supraloral area. The bill is dull gray-black, paler on the cutting edge and mandible, looking small and fine in shape. On the crown is an extensive chestnut cap that is only slightly obscured by gray feather tips. The eyes are dark brown. The hindneck and back are gray, very slightly tinged in brown. The rump and uppertail-coverts are yellow-green. The chin is a pale gray with a few individuals tinged a pale yellow. The lower breast and belly is dull whitish, faintly tinged with a pale yellow-buff. The side and flanks of the breast are gray. The undertail-coverts are bright yellow. The legs and feet are a dull gray-brown with the soles of the toes yellowish. The wing-coverts are gray; the flight feathers are dark gray, edged with pale gray. First spring males are very similar looking to adult males. The yellow is less extensive on the breast with the primaries and rectrices browner and more worn than on adult birds.

Adult breeding plumaged females look similar to adult males, but the crown patch is a paler rufous and less extensive. The yellow on the breast is far less extensive, and is usually confined to the centre of the breast.

First fall males look similar to adult males in spring, but the upperparts are a mouse brown. A few chestnut feathers on the crown, but these are largely obscured. The yellow of the central breast varies from nearly absent to fairly extensive, but is often obscured by gray-buff feather tips. The sides and flanks strongly washed with buff. The eye-ring is slightly buff tinged.

First fall females look very similar to first fall males, but yellow is nearly or completely absent from the breast with the having buff wash. The rufous normally is completely lacking on the cap.

Juvenile birds are gray-brown above with a dull yellow on the rump and uppertail-coverts. These birds look light brown below, with a dull whitish belly and undertail coverts.

The song of the Virginia's Warbler is a fairly weak, clear warble; unaccented, not crisply delivered, usually in two-parts (Sibley 2000). Song does resemble western populations of Nashville Warbler, but sounds lower and less structured (Sibley 2000). They can often sound as a 3 part "*seedi seedi seedi seedi slip slip suwi suwi*" (Sibley 2000). This song can also resemble a Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) song (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000). The call note is a loud, sharp "*plink*" or "*chink*" which is similar to the western population of Nashville Warbler, but is huskier and louder (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Virginia's Warbler is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 4 sight records for the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first reported sighting for British Columbia was of an adult singing male found by Adrian Paul in Kleena Kleene on June 28, 1963 (Paul 1965). This record most likely is valid, but unfortunately details of the sighting are lacking in the write up and have remained hypothetical which is likely why this record was excluded by Campbell *et al.* (2001). The second record for the Province was found by the late Glen Ryder at Campbell Valley Park in Langley on May 5, 1978 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The notes which have been reviewed by at least one of the authors of this report leave little doubt about the identity of this bird and likely because there was no photograph that this record was unfortunately overlooked by Campbell *et al.* (2001). Given the outstanding knowledge and reputation of the observer, this record should be treated as the first record for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The third record for British Columbia was an adult female in breeding plumage found by Wes Aslin at Mill Lake Park in Abbotsford during a passerine fallout on April 30, 2017 (W. Aslin Pers. Comm.). The bird was not relocated despite an extensive search later in the day (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). Unfortunately no photographs were secured of this bird despite great efforts to do so, however, excellent detailed notes were taken of the bird at the time of the observation (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The fourth record for British Columbia was an adult male in breeding plumage found by Paul Baker David Baker and Rick Toochin on private property in Matsqui Prairie on May 6, 2017 (P. Baker Pers. Comm.). The bird was in the company of several other species, including an adult Nashville Warbler with which it was directly compared (D. Baker Pers. Comm.). The bird was observed at point blank range before disappearing into an area off limits to the public, which is why photographs were not obtained (D. Baker Pers. Comm.). Detailed notes were taken of the bird at the time of the observation (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.).

The timing of these records fits perfectly with Virginia's Warblers' northward migration and are likely overshoots when this species arrives on their northern breeding grounds from late April to early June (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garret 1997, Olson and Martin 1999). This species does wander frequently throughout North America both in the spring, fall and during the winter months (Olson and Martin 1999). The Virginia's Warbler is possible as a vagrant anywhere in British Columbia and should be watched for again in the future.

Table 1: Records of Virginia's Warbler for British Columbia

- 1.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male May 5, 1978: Glen R. Ryder: Campbell Valley Park, Langley (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult breeding plumage female April 30, 2017: Wes Aslin, mobs: Mill Lake Park, Abbotsford (W. Aslin Pers. Comm.)

3.(1) adult breeding plumage male May 6, 2017: Paul Baker, mobs: on private property in Matsqui Prairie, Abbotsford (P. Baker Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical

1.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male June 28, 1963: Adrian Paul: Kleena Kleene (Paul 1965)

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