

First record of the Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) for British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin (Revised: April 2014).

Introduction and Distribution

The Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) is a species of thrush that is found breeding across Eurasia from the southern tip of Greenland, irregularly in Iceland through to Scandinavia, across northern Russia to Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia (Cramp 1988, Green 1998, Clement 2000). The Fieldfare winters from Iceland, Great Britain south irregularly to North Africa, but are found along the Mediterranean countries through Turkey to the Middle East as far east as Tajikistan (Cramp 1988, Clement 2000, Birdlife International 2013). The Fieldfare is a species that breeds in the eastern part of Russia, but migrates west towards Europe (Cramp 1988, Brazil 2009). As a result of this migration, it is considered an accidental vagrant to Northeast China and Japan (Brazil 2009). The Fieldfare is a rare but increasingly annual vagrant to eastern North America with multiple records coming from Atlantic Canada (Cramp 1988, Godfrey 1986, Green 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are other records from the American east coast states such as Massachusetts, New York and Delaware (Green 1998, Sibley 2000). There are also records for Quebec, Ontario and Baffin Island (Godfrey 1986, Green 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is an incredibly rare vagrant in western North America with Alaska having about four records, and there are no other records along the West Coast outside of British Columbia (Roberson 1980, Green 1998, OFO 2012, Wahl *et al.* 2005, West 2008, WBRC 2012). This is the only record of a Fieldfare for British Columbia and constitutes a new accidental species for the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013). Given that the species does breed in Siberia and is a long distance migrant, it is highly likely another Fieldfare could turn up in British Columbia again in the future.

Identification and Similar Species

The Fieldfare is a large thrush that is very distinct and is easily identified from other Asiatic thrush species that could occur in British Columbia. In overall size, the Fieldfare is a bit bulkier than an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), but in length is about the same size (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Adults are distinctive with a gray head, dark facial area, and a dark crown with a large white eyebrow that starts from the base of the bill and ends past the eye (Larsson 1993, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The eyes are dark and the bill yellow based with a dark tip (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). All birds have a white malar stripe with a dark line that starts at the base of the auricular area and cuts across the throat (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The throat is ochre colored with small dark spots in the center (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). This ochre color is heavier across the chest with dark vertical streaks cutting through the color (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The belly is white and extends down to the vent (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). There are dark chevrons down the sides of the breast that extend onto the flanks with dark streaks on the undertail coverts (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). There is an obvious purple-brown back patch on birds that separates the gray head from the large gray colored rump (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are dark brown and

lack wing bars (Sibley 2000, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Both the legs and the tail are all dark in color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight, the Fieldfare has striking white under wing coverts with dark primaries, and an obvious dark secondary edge (Sibley 2000, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The first winter birds look like the adults but have pale spots on the wing coverts (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The calls of the Fieldfare are quite distinctive with birds giving a squeaky “*gih*” or a chattering “*schack-schack-schack*” which can be heard from birds in flight or on the ground (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009).

Occurrence and Documentation

On December 28, 2003, Larry Cowan was participating in the Pitt Meadows Christmas Bird Count. Late in the afternoon he decided to check an area that was good for attracting wintering American Robins. Upon arriving in the industrial park he noticed a group of American Robins sitting on a lawn that had a bird amongst them that didn't look correct. After focusing on the bird he quickly realized he had a Fieldfare. After racing home to get his camera and a field guide, he was able to get back right at the end of the day and snap three images of the bird before it got dark. The photos were sent to various experts to get verification on the identification of the Fieldfare. All parties agreed that the images did indeed show a Fieldfare amongst a group of American Robins. Unfortunately despite multiple attempts to relocate the bird it was never found again after the first observation. This record is a great example of why observers should check American Robin flocks in both winter and in migration. There is always a possibility that observers could find any species of Asiatic thrush mixed in a flock of American Robins. The Fieldfare is a species that wanders throughout Europe and into Asia even in the winter months. In North America it is better known as an East Coast vagrant with birds turning up almost always with flocks of American Robins. It is impossible to know the origin of this particular Fieldfare, but since Alaska has had four records it is highly possible that this bird was blown out of East Asia by a large weather event, and it came into North America from Alaska (Roberson 1980, Green 1998). With two British Columbia records for Dusky Thrush (*Turdus naumanni*) and one record for Washington, as well as a single wintering record of Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) from Washington, it is entirely possible that another Fieldfare could turn up in British Columbia in the future. If an observer does find another Fieldfare in the Province, it is highly likely it will be travelling with a flock of American Robins.



Figures 1, 2 & 3: Record #1: Fieldfare at 1610 Kebet Way, Meridian Industrial Park, Port Coquitlum on December 28, 2003. Photos © Larry Cowan.

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