Status and Occurrence of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea* in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

**Introduction and Distribution**
The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea* is a small passerine found breeding across North America from Florida up the east coast to southern Maine, into southern Quebec, through southern Ontario, south through Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, part of Colorado, Wyoming, parts of Montana, southern Idaho, Oregon, with birds breeding south into Mexico (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The entire northern population is migratory and most winter from Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern Texas into Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Kershner et al. 2012). North of Oregon, this species is an accidental vagrant. In Washington State, there are 13 accepted records of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl et al. 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is an accidental vagrant with over a dozen Provincial records (Toochin et al. 2014a, see Table 1). There are scattered records from Alberta and Manitoba (Kershner et al. 2012). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a rare vagrant to the Maritime Provinces (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

**Identification and Similar Species**
The identification of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is covered in all standard North American field guides. In the context of British Columbia, there is no other species that looks like the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher so identification should be fairly straight-forward. The following description is taken from Kershner et al. (2012). The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a very small, bluish gray, long-tailed songbird. This species measures in total length 10.0 to 11.5 cm; and weights in mass 5 to 7 grams. The males and females look very similar to each other in basic plumage, but males are distinguished from females in alternate plumage (January-August) by a black forehead and supercilium. The tail constitutes over 45% of the bird’s total length. The bill is fine-tipped and narrow with a slight lateral flattening at the bill base surrounded by prominent rictal bristles. The upperparts on adult birds are bluish to ultramarine colour. There is a prominent white eyering with the underparts white. The tail is black with the outer rectrices edged with white. The tail is frequently fanned showing the white edges. Juvenile birds are washed grayish overall with a fleshy gape and a loosely-textured contour in the feathers.

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher makes a loud explosive “pwee” call note. The song is a series of high, thin, notes, chip and buzzy notes (Sibley 2000).

The only species in British Columbia that remotely looks like the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is the Bushtit *Psaltriparus minimus*. This species is about the same size and measures 11 cm (Dunn...
and Alderfer 2011). The Bushtit is overall gray in colour, with a brownish crown and a small black bill (Sibley 2000). There is a dark line that goes from the base of the bill to the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are black (Sibley 2000). Though similar in size and shape, the Bushtit should not pose any confusion with a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

**Occurrence and Documentation**

In British Columbia, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is an accidental species with 17 Provincial records (Toochin et al. 2014a, see Table 1). There are records from a number of regions of the Province with Vancouver Island having the most records with 8 records, there are 5 records for the Vancouver Area, there is 1 record from the Fraser Valley, and there are 3 records for the interior coming from Keremeos, Nakusp and Pemberton (Toochin et al. 2014a, see Table 1). This species turns up in British Columbia predominantly in the fall with 13 records occurring from August to December (Toochin et al. 2014a, see Table 1). There is one record for May and 3 records for the month of June (Toochin et al. 2014a, see Table 1). Most occurrences of the Blue-gray Gnatcatchers found in the Province are with mixed flocks of Kinglets, Chickadees or Bushtits, but they can also be found on their own (Campbell et al. 2007). The pattern of vagrancy found in British Columbia is repeated in Washington State where 9 of the 13 state records come from the August to November time period (Wahl et al. 2005, WBRC 2012). There are also 3 summer records spanning from May –July and a single February record (Wahl et al. 2005, WBRC 2012). Observers should watch for this species in the future as the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher breeds as close as Oregon and has a clear pattern of wandering north of its common range. Whenever possible it is also encouraged that observers try to photograph and document sightings of this little southern visitor if they find it anywhere in British Columbia.

![Figure 1: Record #8: Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Nakusp on November 14, 2006. Photo © Gary Davidson.](image-url)
Table 1: Records of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher for British Columbia:
4.(1) adult October 24, 1984: Peggy Irving, Muriel Upshall : 1234 W. 14th Ave, Vancouver (Toochin et al. 2014c)
6.(1) adult male August 5-6, 2002: David Woodward, mobs (photo) RPBO, Metchosin (Cecile 2003a, Toochin et al. 2014b)
7.(1) female September 4, 2006: Quentin Brown, Murray MacDonald: Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Cecile 2007a, Toochin et al. 2014c)
8.(1) adult November 14-25, 2006: Gary Davidson, mobs (photo) Nakusp (Cecile 2007a, Davidson 2007a)
9.(1) female September 25, 2007: Rick Toochin: West Coast Road, Shirley (Toochin et al. 2014b)
10.(1) female October 28, 2007: Mary Robichaud, mobs (photo) Lagoon Rd., Esquimalt Lagoon, Victoria (Toochin et al. 2014b) [likely same bird as above]
11.(1) adult May 21, 2011: Chris MacDonald (photo) Keremeos (Toochin et al. 2014a)
12.(1) female December 3-8, 2011: Steven Roias, and other observers: Beacon Hill Park, Victoria (Toochin et al. 2014b)
13.(1) adult June 28, 2012: John Tschopp: Pemberton (Toochin et al. 2014a)
14.(1) female October 1-December 9, 2012: Steven Roias, and other observers: Swan Lake, Victoria (Toochin et al. 2014b)
16.(1) female/immature October 16, 2015: Kevin Louth, mobs (photo) between 96th – 104th St., Boundary Bay, Delta (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)
17.(1) female/immature November 2, 2015: Mike and Barb McGrenere, mobs (photo) Chinese Cemetery, Victoria (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:
1.(1) adult December 30, 1979: Adrian Dorst: Chesterman’s Beach (Toochin et al. 2014b)
2.(1) adult male June 29, 2005: Don Wilshere: Port Alberni (Toochin et al. 2014b)
3.(1) [heard only] August 18, 2002: David Allinson: RPBO, Metchosin (Toochin et al. 2014b)
4.(1) male December 14, 2005: Brooks Road, Chilliwack (Toochin et al. 2014a)

Acknowledgements
We wish to thank Gard Davidson for allowing us the use of his photograph of a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher from Nakusp. We also want to thank Peter Candido for allowing us to use his photograph of a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher from the dyke at Boundary Bay. We also want to thank Melissa Hafting for providing us information on the most recent sighting of a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher from Boundary Bay. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. Photographs are not to be reproduced, published or retransmitted on any website without the authorization of the photographer.

References


