

**Status and Occurrence of the Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*)
in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin**

Introduction and Distribution

The Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*) is a desert species that is found breeding in arid environments from localized areas of central Washington State, to south-central Oregon and southeast Oregon, southern Idaho, southwest Wyoming, south to northwest Colorado, western Oklahoma, Texas and through New Mexico, Arizona to California and south to the Baja California Peninsula (Beadle and Rising 2002, Wahl *et al.* 2005). Black-throated Sparrow's retreat from the northern portion of their breeding range to winter in areas such as southeastern California, central Arizona, southern Nevada, southwestern Utah and into New Mexico with birds being found in most of western Texas (Beadle and Rising 2002, Wahl *et al.* 2005). Very rarely Black-throated Sparrows are found as winter birds in Oklahoma and southern coastal California (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002). As vagrants, the Black-throated Sparrow has been found throughout the eastern United States with birds reaching eastern parts of Canada such as Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador (Sibley 2000, Escott 1994). In western Canada the Black-throated Sparrow has been found in Saskatchewan and Alberta (Sibley 2000, Escott 1994). The first record of Black-throated Sparrow in British Columbia was of a bird found by Anne Miller and was collected the same day by her mother on June 8, 1959 at Murtle Lake near Wells Gray Park (Godfrey 1961, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013). Since the first record British Columbia has had a dramatic increase in records with some years having irruptions of birds (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013). The Black-throated Sparrow is a casual but an increasingly encountered species in British Columbia. There are no records for Alaska (West 2007).

Identification and Similar Species

The Black-throated Sparrow is identified easily from all other sparrows that occur in British Columbia. In overall size the Black-throated Sparrow is a small, slim bird with a long tail and has a habit of staying close to the ground (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2003). In all plumages, the tail on both sides is black with the tips of the outer most rectrices feathers being white and the outer webs of the lateral tail feathers being whitish (Beadle and Rising 2002). Adults are identified by their dark crown with a dark line and broad white eye stripe that goes from the base of the bill to the nape (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a dark auricular patch that goes through the dark eye with a partial white eye arc under the eye (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2003). A broad white malar stripe goes from just past the base of the bill to the neck (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2003). The bill is blue-gray in color with the upper ridge on the upper mandible being dark (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2003). The throat is black and

triangular in shape (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2003). The breast is gray, pale and unmarked (Beadle and Rising 2002). The undertail coverts are brownish in color (Sibley 2000). The back is gray-brown which extends onto the rump and wings (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002).

The Black-throated Sparrow in juvenile plumage is different looking to adult birds by having a bold white supercilium that goes from the base of the bill over the and past the eye to the back of the neck (Beadle and Rising 2002, Sibley 2000). The face is dark from below the eye stripe from the base of the bill through the eye to the dark auricular area (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is weak white eye arc below the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The malar area is bold white and a weak dark malar line below (Beadle and Rising 2002). They also have a bold white throat and breast band across the chest (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rest of the sides, flanks and belly are pale and not streaked (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The song of the Black-throated Sparrow is a short mechanical tinkling “*swik swik sweeee te-errrr*” (Byers et al. 1995, Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002). The call notes of the Black-throated Sparrow are high pitched tinkling notes that can be a bell-like “*tip*” or series of high “*tee*” notes (Byers et al. 1995, Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Records of the Black-throated Sparrow in British Columbia are undoubtedly of the subspecies (*Amphispiza b. deserticola*) which is the form found from southeastern Washington south through southeastern Oregon to southwestern Wyoming south across the Great Plains to the northern half of Baja California and the northwestern part of Chihuahua in Mexico (Byers et al. 1995, Beadle and Rising 2002). This subspecies of Black-throated Sparrow is slightly different from the nominate subspecies (*Amphispiza b. bilineata*) which is a resident species found from north-central Texas south to eastern Coahuila to Nuevo Leon and north Tamaulipas in northern Mexico. The subspecies (*A. b. deserticola*) is best identified by being slightly paler and browner on the back than (*A. b. bilineata*) and has smaller more confined white spots to outer rectrices feathers (Byers et al. 1995, Beadle and Rising 2002).

Occurrence and Documentation

The status of the Black-throated Sparrow in British Columbia is interesting in that since 1984 it has steadily increased in occurrence. The increase in Provincial records directly correlates to the slow but steady breeding range extension of the Black-throated Sparrow into south-central Washington in the Vantage area in the 1980s (Wahl et al. 2005). There are 46 Provincial records with 42 of these coming from the months of May and June (Cannings et al. 1987, Campbell et al. 2001, Toochin et al. 2013, Please see table 1). The Black-throated Sparrow migrates to areas to breed in northern California in mid-April with birds arriving to breed in southern Oregon in early to mid-May (McCaskie and DeBenedictis 1966, Hunn 1978, Wahl et al. 2005). Records in southern Washington increased over several decades in

appropriate habitat and eventually nesting birds were confirmed in 1976 (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Now a small number of breeding birds arrive in southeastern Washington State annually in early to mid-May (Hunn 1978, Wahl *et al.* 2005). The birds that turn up in British Columbia are likely failed breeding birds that moved north to look for suitable nesting habitat due to drought conditions within the species core range (Hunn 1978, Wahl *et al.* 2005). This would explain the high frequency of May and June overshoot records in the Province (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see table 1). While birding at Hope Airport on May 14, 2013 the author bumped into an adult Black-throated Sparrow feeding with 2 Vesper Sparrows (*Poocetes gramineus*), 5 Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*), several Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) and 3 Lazuli Buntings (*Passerina amoena*). This newly discovered vagrant trap has produced 4 recent records of the Black-throated Sparrow which are likely birds heading up the Fraser Canyon to areas of the dry interior. There are a handful of July records from the Okanagan including a pair with what appeared to be a male singing on territory in Osoyoos which was seen July 17-22, 2008 (Please see Table 1). Unfortunately despite the increase in records from the Osoyoos area no confirmed breeding record has been found (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). The Black-throated Sparrow is still a rare vagrant in British Columbia but records have increased in frequency to become almost annually reported in the Province in the past decade (Please see Table 1). Given the manner in which the species irrupts in numbers it is highly possible a breeding pair will be found in the dry interior region of British Columbia in the coming years. The Black-throated Sparrow has been found on Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland, and the Upper Fraser Valley, the dry interior region from the South Okanagan to Kamloops and in the Kootenay's region of British Columbia making this species possible anywhere in the Province and future records certain for keen observers (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see table 1).



Figure 1: Record #15: Black-throated Sparrow adult at Maple Ridge on May 28, 1994.
Photo © Amy Newman.



Figure 2 & 3: Record # 41: Black-throated Sparrow adult at Hope Airport on June 11, 2012.
Photo © Rick Toochin.

Table 1: British Columbia records of Black-throated Sparrow:

- 1.(1) adult June 8, 1959: (specimen: NMC 44454) Murtle Lake, Wells Gray Park
(Godfrey 1961, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) adult June 15, 1977: A. L. Pollard: Richter lake, Ritcher Pass, south Okanagan
(Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 3.(1) adult June 18, 1979: Richard & Margaret James: Osoyoos
(Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) adult June 27, 1981: Spotted Lake, singing from sagebrush south Okanagan
(Brunton and Pratt 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 5.(1) adult May 20, 1984: Frank Walker, Pauline Cook: Pitt Meadows
(Fix 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 6.(1) adult May 28, 1984: Jack & Rosemond Sarles: White Rock, Surrey
(Fix 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 7.(1) adult June 10, 1984: Eric Keranen, mobs(photo) Surrey Bend, Surrey
(Harrington-Tweit and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 8.(1) adult June 12, 1984: Kimberley (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 9.(1) adult June 13, 1984: Jacques Sirois, D. Hill, Eric Lofroth, mobs: RMBS, Ladner
(Harrington-Tweit and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 10.(1) adult June 23, 1984: Gary Davidson: Burton (Campbell *et al.* 2001,
Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 11.(1) adult May 19, 1985: Dale and Evelyn Jensen: Pitt Meadows
(Mattocks 1985, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 12.(1) adult June 2, 1985: John Ireland, mobs (BC Photo 1112) Lighthouse Pk, W. Vancouver
(Campbell 1985, Harrington-Tweit and Mattocks 1985, Toochin 2012a)
- 13.(1) adult June 13, 1985: Dale A. Jensen, EJ: Rannie Rd., Pitt Meadows (Toochin 2012a)
- 14.(1) adult June 18-19, 1992: Derrick Marven, mobs (BC Photo 1779) Somenos Lake, Duncan
(Marven 1992, Davidson 1993, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)

- 15.(1) adult May 27-31, 1994: Amy Newman, mobs (photo) Maple Ridge
(Escott 1994, Bowling 1994, Davidson 1995, Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001,
Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 16.(1) adult June 16, 1994: Keith Taylor, mobs: Mount Tolmie, Victoria
(Bowling 1994, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 17.(1) adult July 3, 1994: Phil Gehlin: along Commonage Road, Vernon
(Bowling 1994, Davidson 1995, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 18.(1) adult May 17-21, 1996: Peter Gordon, mobs: Sechelt
(Bowling 1996, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 19.(1) adult May 28, 1996: M. Tanner (photo) South Surrey (Toochin 2012a)
- 20.(1) adult June 1, 1997: Hamish Spencer: Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver
(Bowling 1997, Plath 2000, Toochin 2012a)
- 21.(1) adult July 5, 1997: near Chopaka (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 22.(1) adult May 26, 1998: Rick Toochin: Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 23.(1) adult May 1 & 9, 2003: Bill Nicholson: Invermere (Cecile 2003,
Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 24.(1) adult May 21, 2004: Gwynneth Wilson: Kelowna (Cecile 2004a,
Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 25.(1) adult June 15, 2004: John Wei (photo) 1127 Crestline Road, West Vancouver
(Cecile 2004b, Toochin 2012a)
- 26.(1) adult April 27-30, 2006: Arnold Skie, mobs (photo) 4579 Stalashen Drive, Sechelt
(Cecile 2006a, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 27.(1) adult June 10-13, 2006: Istvan Orosi: Colony Farm Regional Park, Coquitlum
(Cecile 2006b, Toochin 2012a)
- 28.(1) adult May 18-26, 2007: Paul Kusmin, mobs (photo) Grant Narrows Nature Dyke Trail,
Pitt Meadows (Cecile 2007, Toochin 2012a)
- 29.(1) adult May 24, 2007: Jeremy Gatten: Chopaka, South Okanagan
(Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 30.(1) adult June 8, 2007: Stan Olson: 2421 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford (Toochin 2012c)
- 31.(1) adult June 15, 2007: Nigel Jacket: Outside Osoyoos along Highway 97
(Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 32.(2) adults (possible breeding record) July 17-22, 2008: Bob McKay, Doug Brown, mobs:
Osoyoos (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 33.(1) adult May 7, 2010: Doug Brown: Strawberry Creek, Osoyoos (seen with hundreds of
White-crowned Sparrows)(Yahoo message #23416 bcintbird)
- 34.(1) adult June 5-7, 2010: Doug Brown: Strawberry Creek, Osoyoos
(Yahoo message #23643 bcintbird)
- 35.(1) adult June 18, 2010: Rick Toochin, Corina Isaac: Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 36.(1) adult May 10, 2012: Doug Brown: Osoyoos Airport
(BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed May 11, 2012)
- 37.(1) adult May 27, 2012: Aaron Gaffney, mobs (photo) at feeder along Front Street
near Albert Street, Yale (Toochin 2012c)
- 38.(1) adult June 9-12, 2012: Roger Foxall, mobs (photo) Pitt Lake, Pitt Meadows
(Toochin 2012a)

- 39.(1) adult June 10, 2012: Wayne Diakow, mobs (photo) Pitt Lake, Pitt Meadows (different bird than above) (Toochin 2012a)
- 40.(1) adult June 11, 2012: Chris Dale, mobs (video) Squamish Estuary (BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed June 30, 2012)
- 41.(1) adult June 11, 2012: Rick Toochin (photo/video) Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 42.(1) adult June 12, 2012: Tracy Lau: near Scarfe Education Building, UBC Campus, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 43.(1) adult June 13, 2012: Rick Toochin: along Laidlaw Road, outside Hope (Toochin 2012c)
- 44.(1) adult June 14, 2012: Ellie Hill (photo) Cinnamon Ridge east of Tranquille, Kamloops (BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed June 30, 2012)
- 45.(1) adult June 26, 2012: Jarrod Hobbs, mobs (photo) Chutter Ranch near Merritt (BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed June 30, 2012)
- 46.(1) adult May 12, 2013: Rick Toochin, Jack & Betty Delair: Hope Airport (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)
- 47.(1) adult May 30, 2013: Russ and Dick Cannings (photo) Osoyoos (BC Bird Alert: Accessed May 30, 2013)

Hypothetical records:

- 1.(1) adult May 9, 2003: Laurie Savard: Triangle Island (Cecile 2003, Toochin *et al.* 2013) [Record withdrawn as observer not sure]

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