

Status and Occurrence of Blackburnian Warbler (*Setophaga fusca*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin (Revised: April 2014).

Introduction and Distribution

The Blackburnian Warbler (*Setophaga fusca*) is a highly migratory eastern warbler, breeding in the Boreal Forests of Eastern Canada from eastern Alberta, near Cold Lake, right across Canada to Newfoundland, south to New England, the upper Great Lakes region, and further south through the Appalachian Mountains to western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The wintering range of Blackburnian Warbler is in Central America and in South America from Columbia, Venezuela, northern Brazil (south in the Andes) to central Bolivia (Curson *et al.* 1994). Migrating birds in North America mostly move through the Mississippi Valley and the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf Coast (Curson *et al.* 1994). From here they either follow the coastline or cross the Gulf of Mexico to the Yucatan Peninsula on their way to central and South America (Curson *et al.* 1994). Vagrancy of this beautiful warbler in the west is well documented with California having over 500 records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The species is so regular in this State that is no longer a review species (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon there are nine accepted records (OFO 2012). In Washington there are seven accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2012). British Columbia has had thirteen records of Blackburnian Warbler (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There are no records for Alaska (West 2008). Because this warbler breeds across the Boreal Forest to Newfoundland, and it is a long distance migrant that can be displaced by large weather systems in the fall, there are records for Greenland, Iceland and Europe (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

Identification and Similar Species

Adult male and female Blackburnian Warblers are very straight-forward birds to identify and are covered in all standard field guides. In modern field guides immature plumages are always shown and covered properly; however, first year female birds can be tricky to identify, and observers in the west should always take careful note to rule out an immature Townsend's Warblers when an immature Blackburnian Warbler is thought to be encountered. The immature Blackburnian Warbler has distinct white mantle stripes in all plumages (Sibley 2003). The immature Townsend's Warbler is green-backed (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The immature female Blackburnian Warbler has a yellow throat which can look superficially similar to an immature female Townsend's Warbler because they also have a bright yellow throat (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The yellow on the throat and sides of a Blackburnian Warbler doesn't extend as far down on the sides and flanks of a Townsend's Warbler (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The immature male Blackburnian Warbler is more similar looking to the adult males in fall plumage as they have a yellow throat, but dark auriculars and a darker back like the adult males (Dunn

and Garrett 1997). They lack the reddish tones in the throat of adult males, but have the yellow forehead stripe and white lines on the back (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2003). On the immature female Blackburnian Warbler the side and flank streaks are thinner, paler and not as dark black or as thick as that of an immature Townsend's Warbler (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2003). The under tail coverts and lower flanks are white on immature female Blackburnian Warblers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). On the immature female Townsend's Warbler, the yellow extends far down on the flanks and belly (Sibley 2003). The dark triangular auricular patch on the Blackburnian Warbler is surrounded in yellow on immature female birds which is different to the Townsend's Warbler in that the cheek patch is smaller, darker and extends up to the nape (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Blackburnian Warbler has less white in the tail than the Townsend's Warbler which is another field mark that should be noted by observers (Sibley 2003). The Cerulean Warbler should also be ruled out when encountering a possible immature Blackburnian Warbler. There are no confirmed records of the Cerulean Warbler for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2013c); however, there are fifteen accepted records for California of which nine records are for the fall (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Fall records have a peak in October with eight records and one record for September (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Though the Cerulean Warbler is not a likely bird to occur in British Columbia, this species should be ruled out when a bird is first encountered as it closely related to the Blackburnian Warbler and can look superficially similar (Dunn and Garrett 1997). There is a hypothetical record of the Cerulean Warbler for British Columbia from Wyndell in June 1982 (Butler *et al.* 1986). So as remote as it seems that British Columbian observers would find a Cerulean Warbler, in recent decades more and more southern and south eastern warblers have increasingly turned up in the western states and provinces, so this scenario is possible. This means observers in British Columbia should make sure that the Cerulean Warbler is ruled out for any potential Blackburnian Warbler encountered. The Cerulean Warbler in all plumages is bluish-colored on the back and lack white mantle stripes (Dunn and Garrett 1997). On the immature female Cerulean Warbler the throat and breast are yellowish in color (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Cerulean Warbler is much smaller in size to the Blackburnian Warbler and, as an immature female, has a pale face and an eye stripe (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In a decade of digital cameras, it is highly likely that future records of the Blackburnian Warbler will be photographed. As with any rarity getting images is important and encouraged so that records can be properly documented.

Occurrence and Documentation

On September 13, 2006, an adult male Blackburnian Warbler was found by the author at Jordan River mixed in with a large migrating flock of Townsend's Warblers that also had a couple of Black-throated Gray Warblers and a few Yellow-rumped Warblers (Toochin 2012b). The bird was constantly moving with this flock and was impossible to photo-document. This bird stayed

in the general area for three days, allowing many to see it. The timing of this sighting fits well with the overall west coast vagrancy pattern found in the fall, established in California. Of the thirteen records for the Province of Blackburnian Warbler (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1), two have occurred in the later part of August (one near Vancouver and one in Vernon). This fits the timing of when it is known that Blackburnian Warblers start migrating south which is in the month of August. (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There are four records (all from Vancouver Island) for the month of September (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). This follows the pattern of records in California where 90% of all the States records comes from the period of August 27 – December 22, with the peak of records occurring in mid-September (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In the middle of September it makes sense to look for this species, as passerine migration peaks in British Columbia at this point in the fall (Campbell *et al.* 2001). There is only one Provincial record for October which comes from the exact same location as a previous September record from Jordan River, and is likely a late or lost bird on its first migration (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). This bird was an immature individual that was found with a large late migrating flock of Townsend's Warblers in the Alder Trees along the Jordan River (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). In the spring there is only one May record for the Province and that comes from the Vancouver area (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There is a possibility that this species breeds sporadically in the north eastern Peace River region of the Province, as the birds preferred habitat is present in the region, and it is a vastly under birded area. There are three July records of singing males in this area that also add weight to the possibility that this species occasionally nests in the Province (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013c). In migration Blackburnian Warblers can be found in either coniferous or deciduous trees. There are no photographed records for this species in British Columbia. There are only, to date, very well described birds documented with detailed field notes. The only record that has physical evidence is a window-killed bird from the Kamloops area (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). To date all records from Vancouver Island have been of birds found in Alder Trees and on, or very near, the coastline. With more records of eastern warblers (such as Northern Parula, Hooded Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler) all occurring in British Columbia during the overshoot window of mid-May to mid-June, observers should be on the lookout for this species at that time. Better coverage given to known coastal vagrant traps will also likely increase the Provincial number of records from mid-August to mid-October. Many Boreal warblers have been found along the coast of British Columbia and, though this species does occur a bit further east than many that regularly occur along the coast in the fall, there is no reason to not expect one of these little gems to reoccur in the future.

Table 1: Blackburnian Warbler observations in British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult male July 9, 1930: Williams: Thorson's Landing, south of Ft. St. John (Williams 1933b, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 2.(1) adult fall male August 25, 1960: Glen R. Ryder: 15453 92nd Ave., Fleetwood, North Surrey (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 3.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male May 12-14, 1974: John Dixon: 2349 W. 49th Ave., Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 4.(1) adult male July 11, 1978: singing in Spruce Trees near Toad River (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 5.(1) adult male July 4, 1990: Rick & John Toochin: Ft. Nelson Airport (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 6.(1) adult male June 5, 1995: Prue and Bernie Spitman: near Steamboat, 60 km west of Fort Nelson (Bowling 1995, Spitman 1996, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 7.(1) immature August 29, 1995: Chris Siddle: Vernon (Bowling 1996, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 8.(1) female third week of June, 1998: (specimen) Thuya Lakes north of Kamloops (Shepard 1998, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 9.(1) immature male September 22, 2004: Rick Toochin: Amphitrite Point, Ucluelet (Cecile 2005, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 10.(1) immature female September 8, 2005: Jamie Fenneman: Courtenay, Comox Valley (Cecile 2006, Toochin *et al.* 2013d)
- 11.(1) fall male September 13-16, 2006: Rick Toochin, and other observers: Jordan River (Cecile 2007, Toochin 2012b)
- 12.(1) adult male September 1, 2008: Jim Davis: Beaton Provincial Park, Ft. St. John (Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 13.(1) immature male October 21, 2009: Rick Toochin: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)

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