

## Status and Occurrence of the Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin

### Introduction and Distribution

The Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) is a species that has two distinct subspecies. The northern and western subspecies is (*S. p. hesperophilus*) commonly referred to as the “green-backed” form of Lesser Goldfinch (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This subspecies is resident in its range from southern Washington State south through western and southeastern Oregon, across northeastern California into northern Nevada, and northern Utah south through California and central Arizona to southern Baja California and the southern Sonora region of Mexico (Beadle and Rising 2006). The nominate subspecies (*Spinus p. psaltria*) also commonly referred to as the “black-backed” form of the Lesser Goldfinch is a resident in its range from central-eastern Arizona, to northern Colorado, northwestern Oklahoma, through north and central Texas south through central eastern and southern Mexico to Guerrero, Oaxaca and central Veracruz in Mexico (Beadle and Rising 2006). There is interbreeding of both subspecies in the areas between Colorado and northern Texas (Sibley 2000). Birds found in southern Texas through Mexico are of the black-backed subspecies (*Spinus p. psaltria*) (Sibley 2000). Birds found west of Colorado and New Mexico are of the green-backed subspecies (*S. p. hesperophilus*) (Sibley 2000). The Lesser Goldfinch is an accidental vagrant to the eastern United States with the furthest eastern American record coming from the State of Maine (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Lesser Goldfinch in the past was considered a casual species to British Columbia but its status is quickly changing to a rare regular species as records increase in frequency (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). All 13 records of Lesser Goldfinch in British Columbia are of the green-backed subspecies (*S. p. hesperophilus*) (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The only other Canadian record for this species is an adult female found on August 10, 1982 from southern Ontario (Godfrey 1986). There are no records of Lesser Goldfinch for Alaska (West 2008). The frequency of records is increasing in British Columbia and this species should be watched for in the future by keen observers.

### Identification and Similar Species

The only subspecies to have been documented in British Columbia is the green-backed form of Lesser Goldfinch and it is this form that is discussed in this section. In all plumages, the Lesser Goldfinch is identified by its small size, short tail, yellow undertail coverts and a white patch at the base of the primaries (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Adult males have a black cap and black nape with a bright green to greenish-yellow mantle that extends down on the rump (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The triangular bill is black in color and small in size (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat, lower sides of

the neck, all the way down to the undertail coverts are a bright deer banana yellow color (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). The wings are black with white wing bars and white edges to the tertial feathers with a white patch at the base of the primaries (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is short with large white patches on the upper side of the tail base with a black tip (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the tail is white with a black border that runs down the sides of the tail and is thickest across the tail tip (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are pale pinkish in coloration (Beadle and Rising 2006). Adult female Lesser Goldfinches are variable in coloration showing either a rich yellow breast or a light yellow wash on the breast (Beadle and Rising 2006). The yellow may show individual intensity in coloration but Lesser Goldfinch females always have yellow on the undertail coverts (Sibley 2003, Beadle and Rising 2006). The bill is dark grayish color and is small in size (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). The face on adult females is yellow on the throat and below the cheek area with the rest of the head being green-olive that extends down the back onto the rump (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). Both the upper side and underside of the short tail are dark with little to no white in the feathers (Sibley 2000, Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are pale in coloration (Sibley 2000). The wings are black overall with narrow white wing bars and white edged tertials with a smaller but present white primary patch on the wings (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). In flight, both the male and female Lesser Goldfinch, have an obvious wing patch and this is present on both the upper and underside of the wing (Sibley 2000, Sibley 2003, Beadle and Rising 2006). All first winter males throughout the Lesser Goldfinches range have a green back and at this age will have some black on the crown above the top of the bill (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The song of the Lesser Goldfinch is slow and disjointed with less repetition in the notes than American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*) (Sibley 2003, Beadle and Rising 2006). The calls of the Lesser Goldfinch are a distinctively high, clear, plaintive “*thlee*” or “*teeeyee*” (Sibley 2003, Beadle and Rising 2006). The flight call of the Lesser Goldfinch is a harsh grating “*chig-chig-chig*” or “*chaup-chup-chup*” which is very different to the calls given by the American Goldfinch (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The American Goldfinch is a larger bird that no matter what age always shows white undertail coverts, a longer tail, a larger bill that is pink colored in breeding plumage and bolder white wing bars in all ages (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). The song of the American Goldfinch is a high rapidly repeated phrased musical “*toWEE-toWEE-toWEEto tweer-tweert-ti-ti-ti-ti*” (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). The call of the American Goldfinch is a thin, wiry sounding “*toweeeowee*” or “*tweeee*” with some variations given (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006). The flight call of the American Goldfinch is a soft whistled descending series of “*ti-di-di-di*” notes (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2006).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

Lesser Goldfinches have been slowly pushing north over the past 60 years. The first record for Washington State came from the southern town of Camas in mid-August 1951 (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Since that time Lesser Goldfinches have become an established species in Washington State and have remained a resident along the Columbia River in Klickitat County with birds turning up in the rest of State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). In British Columbia the first record of a Lesser Goldfinch was of an adult collected by T.T. McCabe at Indianpoint Lake near Bowron Lake Park on June 9, 1931 (Dickinson 1953, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013). Over the next 76 years there were just three valid sightings in the Province until 2007 (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). It appears that in the past 6 years, since 2007, Lesser Goldfinch records have increased exponentially and have occurred on Vancouver Island in Shirley, in Vancouver, Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Hope, Lillooet, Princeton and in Lardeau (Cecile 2007c, Johnston 2009, Charlesworth 2011c, Toochin 2012a, Toochin 2012b, Toochin 2012c, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There are 13 records for the Province with occurrences spread out throughout the year. Out of these records just about half of them come from the month of May (Please see Table 1). So far, 10 of the 13 records for British Columbia are of adult males which are logical given how much more obvious males are to females. It is likely that females do occur as frequently as males in the Province but go largely undetected. Almost all records of the Lesser Goldfinch in the Province are of birds coming to feeders and being loosely in the company of American Goldfinches. With more feeder watchers and careful scrutiny, it is likely that this species will continue to increase in records in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #6: Lesser Goldfinch adult male at Abbotsford on June 14, 2008.  
Photos © Rick Toochin



Figure 3 & 4: Record #8: Lesser Goldfinch adult male at Shirley on May 1, 2011.  
Photos © Sandy Bowie

**Table 1: British Columbia records of Lesser Goldfinch:**

- 1.(1) ad m June 9, 1931: T.T. McCabe (specimen: MCZ 281803) Indianpoint Lake near Bowron Lake Park (Dickinson 1953, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) adult female May 17, 1958: K. Racey (specimen: PMNH 72201) Huntingdon (Racey 1958, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012c)
- 3.(1) adult male October 22-23, 1983: Tony Greenfield, mobs (photo) Sechelt (Hunn and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) adult male May 11-16, 1999: R.J. Herzig, mobs (BC Photo 1789) near Princeton (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 5.(1) adult male May 5-6, 2007: Marlene Johnston: Lardeau (Cecile 2007, Johnston 2009, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 6.(1) adult male June 11-28 & July 19-August 21, 2008: Stan Olson, mobs (photo) 2093 Topaz Street, Clearbrook, Abbotsford (Johnston 2009, Toochin 2012c)
- 7.(1) adult male March 11, 2011: Stephen Forgacs (photo) 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. & Blanca St., Pt. Grey, Vancouver (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult male April 10, 2011: Steve Forgacs: 9<sup>th</sup> Ave. & Trimble St., Pt. Grey, Vancouver (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin 2012a)
- 8.(1) male April 30 –May 3, 2011: Cathy Carlson, mobs (photo) 2900 Fishboat Bay Road, Shirley (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin 2012b)
- 9.(1) adult male January 22-25, 2012 : Thalia Grant, mobs (photo) Ortona Ave, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult male February 15, 2012: Thalia Grant, mobs (photo) Ortona Ave, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 10.(1) adult female February 11, 2012: RT : north end of Topaz Dr., Sardis [with 8 American Goldfinches](Toochin 2012c)
- 11.(1) adult male April 23-24, 2012: Ian Routley, mobs (photo) Lillooet (BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed April 25, 2012)

- 12.(1) adult male May 18-20, 2012: Patricia Elwell, mobs (photo) Princeton  
(BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed May 21, 2012)
- 13.(1) adult female May 13, 2013: Rick Toochin, Al Russell: Hope (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) immature September 15-16, 1983: Brian M. Kautesk, JAM, HM: Jericho Park, Vancouver  
(Hunn and Mattocks 1984, Toochin 2012a) [accepted by VRBC but details are questionable]
- 2.(1) dark-backed subspecies September 6, 1993: Mike Price: Jericho  
(Siddle 1994, Davidson 1994, Campbell *et al.* 2001)  
[record accepted by BCFO but details are questionable]

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