

The First Record of Mexican Violetear (*Colibri thalassinus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile. Submitted: April 15, 2017.

Introduction and Distribution

The Mexican Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*) is a large, spectacular hummingbird whose range runs from the mountains of southern Mexico discontinuously south through Central America (Howell and Webb 2010). In 2016, Green Violet-ear was split with the northern population found from Mexico through Nicaragua as Mexican Violetear and birds found from Costa Rica to Bolivia called Lesser Violetear (*Colibri cyanotus*); the latter has not been recorded in North America (Chesser *et al.* 2016).

The Mexican Violetear is not uncommon within its normal range, but its range doesn't come close to approaching the United States border with Mexico (Newfield 2001). The Mexican Violetear is a species that inhabits highland areas (Newfield 2001). This species is usually found at an elevation range that is between 1,000 to 3,000 meters above sea level (Howell and Webb 2010). The Mexican Violetear is a fairly resident species in the interior of Mexico and on adjacent slope from Jalisco, and southern San Luis Potosi to El Salvador (Howell and Webb 2010). Most females and immatures withdrawal south in November to January after breeding, and it is presumed these birds retreat to northern Central America where females and immatures greatly outnumber adult males during this time period. This species does make considerable altitudinal movements during the course of their annual cycle (Newfield 2001). The Mexican Violetear is found in humid to semiarid pine-oak, oak, and evergreen forests with edge clearings with flowers (Newfield 2001). This species feeds low to fairly high; where it perches and sings, often tirelessly, on exposed bare twigs (Newfield 2001). Breeding occurs in March, July through September in Mexico to northern Central America, and from August to January in Guatemala (Howell and Webb 2010). So far, all reports from North America that have been well documented have been of the Mexican Violetear with northward dispersal well documented by over 46 accepted records (Newfield 2001). The first record for North America was found in the Rio Grande at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, from July 11-28, 1961 (Newfield 2001). Since that time the Mexican Violetear has become a rare, but infrequent visitor to Texas with 81 records (as of January 2017) from the state and almost all the accepted records having been found east of the Pecos River (Newfield 2001, TBRC 2017). This species has turned up as a vagrant all over eastern United States with records from as far north as Maine (Sheehan and Vickery 2007), Minnesota (MOURC 2014), Quebec (Bannon *et al.* 2009), and Ontario (Escott 1992).

In western North America, the Mexican Violetear is far less frequently reported, but has been found in New Mexico (NMBRC 2016), Colorado (CBRC 2017), and Alberta (Slater 1997).

On the west coast of North America, the Mexican Violetear is an accidental vagrant that has only been recorded a couple of times. There are 2 accepted records for California by the California Bird Records Committee with the first record of a bird photographed at Mt. Pinos in Ventura County from July 30-1 August, 1977 and 1 bird found at Berkeley Alameda County on August 18, 1977 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There no accepted records for Oregon or Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2016, WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, there is one recent photographed record from Vancouver Island (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Mexican Violetear is covered in all standard field guides. This is a large hummingbird measuring 12 cm in length, with a wingspan of 17 cm, the bill measuring 18-22 mm in length, and weighing 5.9 grams (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species if encountered in British Columbia is distinctive enough to pose no serious identification problems. It should be noted that the similar looking, slightly larger, Sparkling Violetear (*Colibri coruscans*) is kept in captivity in North American aviaries, and escapees could be misidentified as a Mexican Violetear (Howell 2003). The best way to distinguish the 2 species is that Sparking Violetear has violet from the auriculars extending forward in a broad band under its eyes to the chin (Howell 2003).

The Mexican Violetear is a fairly large and well-built hummingbird with a straight-looking bill than can be slightly de-curved, and medium in length, often looking proportionately short (Howell 2003). The tail is fairly long, broad, and notched on males to squared or slightly cleft on females. The primaries are fairly broad with P10 narrower and tapered at the tip (Howell 2003). At rest, the tail is longer than the folded wingtips on adult males, females and immatures and as a result the wingtips do not reach the tail tip on perched birds (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003).

On the adult male the crown, nape, and upper-parts are a deep golden-green with glittering purple lores, and auriculars, with violet-blue extending narrowly and diffusely under the chin (Howell 2003). The distal upper-tail coverts are usually more bronze than the back (Howell 2003). The throat and chest is iridescent bluish-green with violet to purplish-blue patch on the upper chest (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rest of the under-parts are bronzy greenish-blue, greener on R1, with broad blue-black sub-terminal band. The bill is black and the feet are blackish (Howell 2003).

The adult female is slightly smaller and shorter tailed than the adult male (Howell 2003). The plumage overall is duller and less intense green, the crown is duller and more bronze, the auricular tuffs are smaller and less expansive (Howell 2003). The chest patch is bluer and less

purplish, and less extensive, sometimes reduced to a few bluish and poorly contrasting spots (Howell 2003).

In immature birds the sexes are similar. Juvenile plumage is held from June to September (Sibley 2000). The crown, nape, and upper-parts are bronzy-green with fine cinnamon tips most distinct on the head (Howell 2003). The purple is reduced to absent in the lores and averages less on the auriculars (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003). The throat and chest are dull bluish-green with scattered iridescent feathers and a trace of blue on chest (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003). The rest of the under-body is dusky bronzy-green, under-tail coverts pale cinnamon-buff with variable dark centers (Sibley 2000, Howell 2003). The tail is like adult, but R1 averages more bronze-green (Howell 2003).

The call of the Mexican Violetear is a sharp, dry chip usually given in a rapid series of 2-4 notes (Sibley 2000). The song is a series of dry, metallic chips "*chitik-chitik*" "*chitik-chitik*" that are given in an irregular rhythm (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Mexican Violetear is an accidental vagrant anywhere in British Columbia with only 1 recent record of an immature bird photographed by Martin Dollenkamp in a friend's backyard in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014 (M. Dollenkamp Pers. Comm.). The bird was only present a single day and was not seen afterwards (M. Dollenkamp Pers. Comm.). That this species has made it as far north as Canada is incredible given its southern range in Mexico. The Mexican Violetear is a casual to rare visitor mostly into Eastern North America mainly from April to August, with a few found in mid-April and early November (Howell 2003). Most records come from Texas and have occurred between the months of mid-April to mid-September (Howell 2003). Though far from Texas the timing of the single British Columbia record does fall within the period when the Mexican Violetear has occurred in North America. Most North American records of the Mexican Violetear have been birds frequenting a hummingbird feeder, as a result, this species can turn up almost anywhere (Newfield 2001). With the ever-growing popularity of backyard feeding stations, it is possible that another Mexican Violetear could turn up in British Columbia in the future.



Figure 1: Record #1: Mexican Violetear found in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014.
Photo © Martin Dollenkamp.



Figure 2: Record #1: Mexican Violetear found in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014.
Photo © Martin Dollenkamp.



Figures 3 & 4: Record #1: Mexican Violetear found in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014.
Photo © Martin Dollenkamp.



Figure 5: Record #1: Mexican Violetear found in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014.
Photo © Martin Dollenkamp.



Figure 6: Record #1: Mexican Violetear found in Port Alberni on September 4, 2014.
Photo © Martin Dollenkamp.

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