

The Status and Occurrence of Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*) is a small passerine in the North American warbler family. This species breeds in Eastern Canada from southern Manitoba, across southern Ontario, through southern Quebec to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (Curson *et al.* 1994). In the Eastern United States the Northern Parula is found breeding from Maine south locally through New England, south locally to where they become common again in the Carolina's, south through Georgia to Florida and west to eastern Texas (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Northern Parula spends the winter in southern Florida, Cuba, the Bahamas, throughout the West Indies, and in the Greater Antilles and Northern Lesser Antilles; but is rare in the Southern Antilles (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species is also rare in Bermuda in the winter (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Northern Parula also winters in eastern Mexico on the Yucatan Peninsula south to Nicaragua and Costa Rica with birds occasionally being found on Los Roques Island off Venezuela and Panama (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). In migration this species can turn up well west of its core range; there are records scattered throughout the Great Plains and the mid-western part of North America (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species is a rare but increasingly regular vagrant in Europe with records for Greenland, four records for Iceland, fifteen records for Great Britain and one record for France (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Dunn and Garrett 1997). Along the west coast of North America, the Northern Parula has increased in occurrence but is still considered a casual vagrant (Curson *et al.* 1994). The only place on the west coast where Northern Parula is not considered a rarity is California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The species is no longer on the California Bird Committee review list as there are well over 900 records for the state and the species is considered annual each year (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The Northern Parula has been found breeding in coastal California in Marin County, to Santa Barbara County and also in the San Bernardino Mountains in southern California (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In Oregon, the Northern Parula is no longer on the State Review list for the Oregon Bird Records Committee with over thirty state records (OFO 2012). In Washington State there are thirteen accepted records for the State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). There is one fall sight record for Alaska (West 2008). In British Columbia the Northern Parula is still an accidental species with fifteen records for the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Northern Parula is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is one of North America's smallest warblers and is very obvious when encountered (Sibley 2000). The adult male has a dark blue head with two distinct white eye arcs above and below

the dark eyes (Curson *et al.* 1994). There is a dark line from the eyes to the base of the long thin bill which is black on the upper mandible and yellow on the lower mandible (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The yellow lower mandible extending onto a yellow throat is a unique feature of the family Parula (Curson *et al.* 1994). The throat and lower belly are yellow in color (Sibley 2000). There is black band of rufous feathers that extends across the chest feathers (Curson *et al.* 1994). The lower breast is white as are the under tail coverts (Curson *et al.* 1994). The legs are a pale fleshy colour (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The blue of the head extends down the inner side of the neck and onto the wings (Curson *et al.* 1994). The mantle has a yellowish-green patch with the rump being blue in colour (Curson *et al.* 1994). The wing feathers are blue edged in colour with two white wing bars (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The primaries have black edges and the tertials have dark centered feathers with blue edges (Curson *et al.* 1994). The tail is short in overall length (Sibley 2000). The upper surface of the tail is blue in colour on the outer tail feathers with the inner tail feathers being dark in colour (Curson *et al.* 1994). There are white spots on the inner webs of the three outer rectrices (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The underside is white in the central area with dark tips and dark spots at the base of the tail (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The adult female is similar to the adult male but is a paler shade of blue with no red or black on the yellow chest (Curson *et al.* 1994). On females, the yellowish-green mantle patch is reduced in size (Curson *et al.* 1994). The first winter males are pale blue on the head with reduced white arcs above and below the dark eyes (Curson *et al.* 1994). The yellow throat has a reduced bluish neck band with some rufous feathering below (Curson *et al.* 1994). The wing feathers are edged in green and the two white wing bars are slightly reduced in thickness (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The first year females are gray in overall colour with an indistinct greenish mantle patch (Curson *et al.* 1994). The wing feathers are edged in green (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The white eye arcs are reduced in thickness and brightness above and below the dark eyes (Curson *et al.* 1994). The throat and chest are a light yellow colour and are duller in colour to adult female birds (Curson *et al.* 1994). The song of the Northern Parula is a rising buzz with a distinct sharp final note that is often interpreted as a “*zeeeeeeeee-tsup*” or “*zid-zid-zid-zeeeeeee-tsup*” (Sibley 2000). The last “*tsup*” part of the song can be lacking in some individuals (Sibley 2000). The call note is a strong, clear chip note (Sibley 2000). The flight call is a clear descending, often repeated “*tsif*” or “*tsiip*” (Sibley 2000). The Northern Parula is unique-looking and there are no other species that remotely look like this one that regularly occur in British Columbia.

Occurrence and Documentation

There are fifteen records of Northern Parula for British Columbia with only three coming from the interior of the Province. The bulk of these are spring records with the remainder occurring in the fall. There are nine records falling within the spring migration period and span from May 17 – June 24 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). All the records for the period are adult males,

usually singing to alert the observer of their presence (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). Birds found in May are vagrant migrants with the June records likely reflecting overshoot birds that were looking for suitable breeding territories and singing to attract a mate. There are five fall records for the period of August 16 – November 21 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). There is also a summer record of an adult male from late July which could have been a bird that had given up looking for a female and was starting to head south (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). To date there are no winter records for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). In British Columbia the pattern of vagrancy closely follows the established pattern found in California. In California two thirds of the records come from April 6 – July 6, with the peak of records coming from late May and early June (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The fall period includes August 29 – November 30 with the peak of occurrence in the latter half of September (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). This pattern of vagrancy is repeated in Oregon, Washington State and British Columbia. On November 7, 2010, Don Cecile found a male Northern Parula at the Inkaneep Campsite outside Oliver in the south Okanagan and stayed till November 21, 2010 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). This was the first record for this species in the Okanagan and only the second record for the interior of the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). Since this record there has been another interior record (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). The Okanagan Northern Parula ended up staying into late November which makes this sighting the latest recorded date in British Columbia for a Northern Parula (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). There is another November record from Port Alberni was again a male seen from November 9-14, 1996 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). Almost all records for British Columbia pertain to male birds (Toochin *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). This is likely due to the fact that males are easier to detect in the spring, as most of the encountered birds were heard first before being located by an observer (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Given that the Northern Parula is now a rare breeding species in southern California, and records continue to increase in frequency, it is highly probable that there will be more observations of this beautiful little warbler in British Columbia in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Northern Parula at Inkaneep Campsite in Oliver on November 8, 2010. Photos © Thor Manson.

Table 1: British Columbia Records of Northern Parula:

- 1.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male June 24, 1994: Mike Toochin, mobs (photo) Quilchena Golf Course, Richmond (Bowling 1994, Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) fall male November 9-14, 1996: Sandy McRuer, mobs (photo) Port Alberni (Bain and Holder 1996, Bowling 1997, Davidson 1999, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 3.(1) adult male singing (heard only) June 17, 1997: Mike Toochin, Rick Toochin: Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 4.(1) adult female August 23, 2002: David Woodward, Michael Porter, mobs (photo/banded) RPBO, Metchosin (Cecile 2003a, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 5.(1) adult male singing May 17, 2003: Guy Monty: Qualicum Beach (Cecile 2003b, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 6.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male May 24, 2004: Rick Toochin, Corina & Barb Isaac: halfway down Grant Narrows Dyke (Cecile 2004, Toochin 2012a)
- 7.(1) adult male singing (heard only) June 17, 2005: Rick Toochin, Corina Isaac: Spetifore Lands, Tsawwassen (Cecile 2005, Toochin 2012a)
- 8.(1) adult male singing June 13, 2006: David Allinson: Royal Roads, Metchosin (Cecile 2006, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 9.(1) adult female August 16-17, 2006: Gabe David, mobs: near banding station, RPBO, Metchosin (Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 10.(1) adult male singing October 2-4, 2006: Darryl Lum, Margaret Huntley, mobs (photo) Swan Lake Park, Victoria (Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- (1) adult male October 7, 2006: Rick Toochin: 4141 Glanford Mail Processing Plant Grounds, Victoria (Cecile 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)

- 11.(1) adult breeding plumage singing male May 30, 2007: Carlo Giovanella, mobs (photo) Elgin Heritage Park, Surrey (Toochin 2012a)
- 12.(1) adult male July 26, 2008: Rick Toochin: Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley (Cecile 2008, Toochin 2012b)
- 13.(1) adult male singing June 5, 2009: Jeremy Gatten (photo) Edgewood, south of Nakusp (Toochin *et al.* 2013a)
- 14.(1) fall male November 7-21, 2010: Don Cecile, mobs (photo) Inkaneep Campsite, Oliver (Toochin *et al.* 2013a)
- 15.(1) adult male singing June 6, 2012: Dan & Rick Tyson: at west end of Loon Lake (Toochin *et al.* 2013a)

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