

Status and Occurrence of Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin

Introduction and Distribution

The Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*) is an eastern species found breeding from a few areas in Southern Ontario to eastern Oklahoma and across the south eastern United States to Northern Florida (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species only commonly winters in Florida in North America (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In British Columbia there are 7 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2013). Of these records 2 have occurred in the later part of spring and 5 records have occurred in the fall (Toochin *et al.* 2013). Prairie Warblers, like other eastern warblers, occur as vagrants on the west coast of North America and have increased in frequency over the past few decades. In the western United States, the Prairie Warbler has been recorded in California with more than 350 records (to 2007) where it is no longer a review species for the State (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Records decrease the further north travelled in the west but Oregon still has 14 accepted records as of 2012 (OFO 2012) with their being 1 record for Washington on December 29, 1989 from Walla Walla (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012) and there are 2 records for southern coastal Alaska which are both from the month of September (West 2008). The dates are September 22, 1988 on Middleton Island in the Gulf of Alaska (Tobish and Isleib 1989) and September 29, 1990 at Ketchikan in the southwestern panhandle of the State (Tobish and Isleib 1990). Future records in British Columbia are very likely as observer coverage increases and our understanding of vagrancy increases. Due to the wandering nature of Prairie Warblers it is a species of warbler that can occur anywhere in British Columbia.

Identification and Similar Species

Adult male and female Prairie Warblers are fairly straight forward to identify and are well covered by standard field guides. Most field guides today show immature plumages of Prairie Warblers as well. Prairie Warblers are small birds that are long in body and tail shape. This species like Palm Warbler bobs its tail at all times making Prairie Warbler stand out to any observer when encountered. The facial pattern on Prairie Warbler is very distinctive in all plumages but is more subdued in immature females. There is a broad, pale sub ocular crescent on the face is yellow in adult birds but are whiter colored in immature females. This sub ocular crescent is bordered below by a dark moustache strips. The curved dark moustache stripe forms the lower border of the auriculars. All plumages show a spot of dark on the lower sides of the neck. In all ages Prairie Warblers are olive colored on the back with variable chestnut spotting that is found mostly on adults. In all plumages birds are bright yellow below with dark black streaks on the sides in adult s and light dark streaks in immature birds. In all plumages Prairie Warblers have white under tail coverts. When Prairie Warblers fly they often spread their tails showing very broad and long white spots on the outer tail feathers. On the underside

of the tail is white. There are 2 faint wing bars on all ages of Prairie Warbler that are yellow in color. Being a small warbler Prairie Warblers look distinct when encountered and is similar in size and weight to Nashville Warbler which is a common bird in the interior of British Columbia.

Identification of any Prairie Warbler found in spring migration in British Columbia should be straight forward. Where observers need to be careful is in the more likely fall migration window. Palm Warbler is the most likely warbler species to be encountered in British Columbia that is similar looking to Prairie Warbler and has the habit of bobbing its tail. Palm Warblers should be easily eliminated by their chestnut colored crown, larger size dull brownish plumage and bright yellow under tail coverts. Another common breeder in the interior of British Columbia that should rule out in the fall is Magnolia Warbler due to this species similar plumage pattern. Magnolia Warblers have a distinct grayish head, complete eye ring as well as a yellow (not olive) rump, extensive white banded tail pattern. Magnolia Warblers do not bob their tails but they do spread them and flick them like an American Redstart.

As with any vagrant warbler any Prairie Warbler encountered in British Columbia should be documented as well as possible either by photographs or with video if possible.

Occurrence and Documentation

The occurrence of Prairie Warbler in British Columbia has slowly increased as knowledge of eastern warbler vagrancy has increased amongst the Province's observers. Of the 7 Provincial records 2 are photo documented with the rest being documented with well written field notes. Records in September reflect the fall migration peak movement of this species. The November and December records likely reflect lost migrant birds or birds pushed north by late fall storms like the "Pineapple Express" that pushes storms up from waters off Hawaii and off California northward towards coastal Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands. It is possible that birds ending up in this region in November and later come from lost birds at sea off California and are pushed northward by these fast tracking storm fronts. This purely speculation at this time but as records of more and more eastern vagrants occur at this time in the fall in this region after or during this weather event someday the evidence might become more solid. This species should be looked for in the late May early June overshoot window that is reflected with 2 Provincial records to date. Prairie Warblers on migration will use open habitats such as young deciduous trees such as Birch, Willow or Alder Trees to feed but do also prefer open scrubby habitats to feed. The bird in Sooke was found in a mixture of Scotch Broom and open hedgerow habitat while the bird in Tofino was in hanging out in a small grove of Alder and Birch Trees (Toochin 2012). In the breeding season Prairie Warblers prefer scrubby successional habitat such as regenerating fields, pastures, clear-cuts, power line right-of-ways, old abandoned

orchards or small patches of habitat. Prairie Warblers are found in the winter in open scrubby clearings and edges. All the British Columbia records are listed below in Table 1.



Figure 1 & 2: First photo documented Prairie Warbler for British Columbia from Triangle Island on September 8, 1995. Photos © Mitch Meredith

Table 1: Prairie Warbler Records for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult male June 17, 1977: Doug Brown: Mount Kobau (Cannings *et al.* 1987, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) male December 18, 1993-January 25, 1994: Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne: Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 3.(1) adult male singing May 29, 1995: Aurora Patterson: Chesterman's Beach near Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) immature male September 8, 1995: Mitch Meredith, and other observers (photo/banded) Triangle Island (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 5.(1) immature November 16-19, 2008: Jan Bradshaw, and other observers (photo) near Tranquille just west of Kamloops (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 6.(1) immature November 23, 2008 & December 28, 2008: Rick Toochin: Sooke (Toochin 2012)
- 7.(1) immature male September 28 – October 3, 2009: Adrian Dorst, and other observers (photo) Tofino (Charleswort 2010)

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Brian and Rose Klinkenberg for editing this manuscript. I would thank Peter Hamel and the late Rory Patterson for providing me details and field notes of their sightings. I would also like to Mitch Meredith for providing both photographs and information on his observation of an immature bird on Triangle Island. Photographs are copyright protected and used here with permission.

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