

# **The Status and Occurrence of the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin and Mitch Meredith.**

## **Introduction and Distribution**

The Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) is a passerine that nests in tree cavities and is often found breeding locally throughout its range in the southeastern United States (Curson *et al.* 1995, Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species breeds from eastern Texas, north into eastern Oklahoma, up into southeastern Nebraska, north to a few locations in South Dakota, locally north to Iowa, very local in Minnesota, locally in Wisconsin, across southern Michigan, east to scattered areas of Up State New York, very rarely in different parts of New England, south through North and South Carolina but is absent from the Appalachian Mountains, but is found through Georgia into northern Florida and west along the Gulf States (Curson *et al.* 1995, Dunn and Garrett 1997). According to the most recent Canadian Federal Government COSEWIC Report, the Prothonotary Warbler is considered as an endangered species in Canada and is only known from a few scattered breeding locations in southern Ontario along Lake Erie of no more than twenty pairs or twenty-four to thirty-eight individual birds (Curson *et al.* 1995, Dunn and Garrett 1997, COSEWIC 2007). Prothonotary Warblers are migratory birds that winter in Central Mexico, from southern Mexico (both along the southern Pacific coast and from the Yucatan Peninsula) south through south to South America in Venezuela and Colombia with many birds also wintering from Cuba south throughout the islands of the West Indies (Curson *et al.* 1995, Dunn and Garrett 1997). As with other southeastern Warblers, Prothonotary Warbler is a species that turns up as a vagrant all over North America well outside of its normal range. Along the West Coast this species is so regular in California it was removed from the State Review List by the California Bird Records Committee in 1989 with 95 accepted records for the State and well over 160 records by 1997 (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are seven accepted records for Oregon and three accepted records for Washington with no records for Alaska (Wahl *et al.* 2005, West 2005, OFO 2012, WBRC 2012). There are no records of Prothonotary Warbler for Alaska (West 2008). The Prothonotary Warbler is an accidental species in British Columbia with records being recorded in various parts of the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013). This species does wander widely and should be looked for again by observers throughout the Province in the future.

## **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Prothonotary Warbler is found in all standard North American field guides. Most show adult birds but many fail to show immature and fall plumaged birds. The Prothonotary Warbler is a large chunky warbler that is unmistakable with no similar looking species to be confused with it that occurs in North America (Curson *et al.* 1994). The adult males in breeding plumage have a large round bright golden yellow head with the yellow colour

extending down the back of the neck to the nape (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The golden yellow also extends down onto the face and completely surrounds a large black eye (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The bill is long, thin tipped and black in colour (Sibley 2000). The golden yellow colouration extends down onto the throat and encompasses the entire breast and chest down past the leg feathers (Curson *et al.* 1994). The undertail coverts are bright white and are long in shape due to the short tail (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The upper back is green in colour (Sibley 2000). The wings are blue-gray in colour and have no wing bars (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The gray colour is also found on the rump of all plumages (Curson *et al.* 1994). The tail is short in length with the upper surface of the tail looking gray when the tail is folded but when spread in flight has white spots on the inner webs of the feathers and a black tail band that goes across the tail tip (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The underside of the tail is pure white with a black tail tip (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000). In flight the axillaries are white with dark primaries and secondaries (Sibley 2000). The legs are a gray colour (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Some adult male variant birds may show a deep orange colour to the head and breast (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The adult females are similar to the adult males but the crown and nape are washed in green (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The base of the lower mandible has some brown colour instead of being black like the adult male (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The yellow on the breast is more subdued and not as brilliant as the adult males (Curson *et al.* 1994). Fall plumaged males are similar to adults but all birds show a pale bill with a few birds showing a small amount of olive tips to the hind neck feathers (Dunn and Garrett 1997). First fall females are the dullest looking birds found within the species (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The forehead, crown and neck and face are washed olive with the yellow underparts looking more yellow than other ages of this species (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). It should be noted that first summer males look very similar to adult male birds but have olive tips to the crown feathers which is golden yellow on adult males (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The song of the Prothonotary Warbler is a clear, ringing, and repetitious slightly upslurred “sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet” also interpreted as “tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet” which can vary from five-twelve notes repeated (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Call note is a dry, loud “chip” that is similar to Hooded Warbler or Swainson’s Warbler or a softer version a Louisiana Waterthrush (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The flight note is a loud “seep” that lacks any buzzy tones (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This note can also be given by perched birds on occasion (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Prothonotary Warbler is a recent arrival to British Columbia with the first record occurring in November 2001 and therefore occurred after the publishing of the Birds of British Columbia Series and is not mentioned in Volume four which discusses Wood-Warblers (Campbell *et al.* 2001). Since this species first occurrence it has occurred almost every other year in the past twelve years including two observations in the fall of 2002 (Please see Table 1). Out of the eight

Provincial records, six records are from the fall period that mirrors California records in the fall (Hamilton et al. 2007, Please see Table 1). Records in the fall in California start in August with the highest peak occurring from mid-September through till mid -October with records continuing to occur into November (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Though there are not a large number of Provincial records, the bulk of British Columbia's records from the fall start in August and peak from mid-September to mid-October with a single record extending into November (Toochin *et al.* 2013). This fall pattern is also repeated with the records in Oregon. Of the seven accepted records, five are from the fall period with records ranging from August to November (OFO 2012). In Washington there are only three accepted records but they all fall within the August – October vagrancy pattern established in California (Wahl *et al.* 1995, WBRC 2012). There is like all other eastern warblers a small peak of Prothonotary Warbler records in California for late spring into the summer months of May-June and July (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). This also is reflected in the two summer records that have been recorded in British Columbia with Oregon also having two summer records as well (Please see Table 1, OFO 2012). Our knowledge of the timing of eastern vagrant warbler species is always increasing and today most observers are aware that these beautiful gems of nature are a possibility. It seems highly likely that with ever increasing awareness and coverage the Prothonotary Warbler will occur in British Columbia again in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Prothonotary Warbler at Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands on October 18, 2010. Photos © Margo Hearne.



Figure 3 & 4: Prothonotary Warbler at Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands on October 18, 2010. Photos © Margo Hearne.

**Table 1: British Columbia Records of Prothonotary Warbler:**

- 1.(1) male November 16, 2001: Shane Ford (specimen) corner of Pandora and Government, Victoria (Cecile 2002, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) adult male October 5-7, 2002: Mitch Meredith, Rick Toochin, mobs (videotaped) Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Cecile 2003, Toochin 2012)
- 3.(1) male October 9-10, 2002: Arti Ahier, mobs (photo) Chesterman’s Beach south of Tofino (Cecile 2003, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) adult male July 14, 2005: Thor Manson: Creston Wildlife Management Area, Creston (Cecile 2005, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 5.(1) adult male June 10, 2007: Lorna Surina (photo) east side of Mirror Lake, Kaslo (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 6.(1) adult male August 27-28, 2008: Doug Brown, mobs (photo) bird banded, Vaseux Lake Bird Banding Station (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 7.(1) adult male October 18, 2010: Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne (photo) Masset, Queen Charlotte Island (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 8.(1) male October 10, 2011: Chris Siddle: Vernon (Toochin *et al.* 2013)

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