

First record of the Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) for British Columbia and Canada.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) is a Eurasian species of flycatcher that breeds from eastern Finland across northern Russia to Sakhalin Island, the North Sea of Okhotsk, Yakutia, the Kamchatka Peninsula, the Kuril Islands, the southern Russian Far East, the Himalayas, north east China, North Korea, as well as northern and central Japan (Cramp 1988, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Clements *et al.* 2012). The entire population winters in south east Asia with birds migrating long distances across Russia to winter from southern Japan, South Korea to southern China including the Himalayas, Taiwan through south east Asia to the Greater Sundas, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos (Cramp 1988, Brazil 2009). The Red-flanked Bluetail is a rare regular migrant in Western Europe mostly in the fall but with some spring records as well (Cramp 1988, Lewington *et al.* 1992). In North America it is a rare vagrant mainly in the spring to western Alaska, especially the Aleutians, but in recent years there also have been a few fall records for the Pribilof Islands and St. Lawrence Island (West 2008, Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Runco 2011). South of Alaska there are only two previous fall records, both are from Coastal California found on remote offshore island vagrant traps with one bird banded on the southeast Farallon Island on November 1, 1989 and the other found recently on San Clemente Island on December 6, 2011 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Runco 2011). There are no records for Oregon or Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2012, WBRC 2012). The recent sighting of Red-flanked Bluetail in New Westminster in the winter of 2013 constitutes a new and accidental bird species for British Columbia and Canada.

Identification and Similar Species

The Red-flanked Bluetail used to be considered an Old World thrush but was recently placed in the family Muscicapidae as an Old World Flycatcher (Cramp 1988, Clements *et al.* 2012). The Red-flanked Bluetail is a distinct looking species that doesn't have any similar looking North American equivalent (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Even vagrant species from Asia such as Siberian Rubythroat (*Luscinia calliope*) and the rare breeding Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) do not look like this species (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is small in size with a round body shape and a habit of twitching its tail with small movements when alerted (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Red-flanked Bluetails prefer forested habitat with some open undergrowth (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Identification of adult males is relatively simple due to their striking plumage. Adult males have a round head that is dark blue in color (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). There is a light eye line from the small dark black bill base to the dark eyes (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The dark blue coloration extends down the back onto the rump and upper surface of the tail (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The wings are also dark blue in color with black centered

feathers found on the tertials and primary tips (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). In some birds there lower edges of the wing are brown colored (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The sides of the neck are blue with the entire flank being a bright orange color (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The area from the breast right down to the belly and to the undertail coverts is white colored (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The legs are light colored (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Adult females are very different in plumage characteristics but share the adult male's bright dark blue rump and upper tail coloration (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The head face and upper back and wings are brownish colored with black eyes, a black bill and a narrow white eye ring (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). This brownish color comes down onto the sides of the throat and gives this bird a narrow looking white throat (Jonsson 1992). The white extends on the center of the breast to the undertail coverts (Jonsson 1992). The sides and flanks are orange in coloration and extend down towards the white ventral area (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The legs are pale in coloration (Jonsson 1992). The first winter birds resemble the adult females but have an obvious wing moult contrast among the greater coverts and the tertials, often with a trace of a pale spot on the tips of the juvenile feathers (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The calls of the Red-flanked Bluetail are a high pitched "uist", often repeated by a hard, nasal "track" which is often repeated (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

Occurrence and Documentation

The only Red-flanked Bluetail for British Columbia and Canada was found by Colin McKenzie in Queen's Park in New Westminster and was present from January 13- March 26, 2013. This bird was enjoyed by many observers and was well photographed and documented. Though there is a recent December record for San Clemente Island off California, the New Westminster bird is the first successful wintering record for North America. The Red-flanked Bluetail has occurred several times in Western Alaska and only had previously been found south of Alaska two times in coastal California. The pattern outside of Alaska is limited but so far shows birds turning up in the late fall and early winter. This follows a similar vagrant pattern found in Western Europe (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Given that Red-flanked Bluetail is a long distance migrant, it is more likely prone to large weather displacement from storms that originate in East Asia and push migrating birds out towards Alaska (Roberson 1980, Lewington *et al.* 1992, Brazil 2009). The Red-flanked Bluetail is still a common species in Eurasia with Birdlife International giving this species the status of Least Concern (Birdlife International 2013). The likelihood of another bird finding its way to British Columbia or somewhere else along the west coast south of Alaska is entirely possible. Observers should be on the watch for this species as it could be found again almost anywhere.



Figure 1, 2 & 3: Red-flanked Bluetail immature male at Queens Park, New Westminster on March 9, 2013. Photos © Greg Stuart and Rick Toochin (far right photo).

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