

Status and Occurrence of Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) is a small migratory passerine that is one of the most nomadic terrestrial birds in North America, with breeding concentrated in widely different portions of its range at different times of the breeding season (Herkert *et al.* 2001). This species is found breeding from eastern-central Alberta from Sangudo and Rocky Mountain House east to Cold Lake and Provost (Nordstrom 1978, Semenchuk 1992); into the southern half of Saskatchewan, except absent from southwest (Smith 1996b); across into southern Manitoba (Godfrey 1986); southern Ontario from Rainy River and the south-western districts of Thunder Bay, west and north to the city of Sudbury in the east, with small numbers also in found in the Sandy Lake region of western Ontario (Gould 1987); also in extreme southern Quebec from the southern Laurentians, central St. Lawrence Lowland, and the southern Appalachians (Fragner and Robert 1996). In the west the Sedge Wren is found south of Saskatchewan into the Dakotas in areas north and east of the Missouri River, with its range extending along the Missouri River to the extreme north-eastern part of Montana (Stewart 1975b, Peterson 1995, Herkert *et al.* 2001); south into eastern Nebraska (Johnsgard 1979a); eastern Kansas (Herkert *et al.* 2001); north and central Missouri (Jacobs and Wilson 1997); southern Illinois (Herkert *et al.* 2001); extreme north-western Kentucky in Henderson County; (Palmer-Ball 1996); southern Indiana (Dancey 1998); western and northern Ohio (Peterjohn and Rice 1991); extreme north-western Pennsylvania from Crawford to Butler Counties (Leberman 1992d); north into central New York State in the Finger Lakes region, and into northern New York State in the St. Lawrence River region (Connor 1988c); and north into north-western Vermont (Kibbe 1985f). Breeding and summering also occur very locally from regular breeding range east to north-eastern New Brunswick (Erskine 1992a) and south through most eastern United States to both shores of the lower Chesapeake Bay, where this species breeds regularly from south Maryland (Blom 1996b) to Accomack County in Virginia (Herkert *et al.* 2001), and south to northern areas of West Virginia (Bucklew and Hall 1994), northern Kentucky (Monroe 1994), and central Arkansas (James and Neal 1986). This species is known to breed sporadically, or at least attempt to breed, at additional areas outside of normal North American range (Herkert *et al.* 2001). This has been documented in Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma and Colorado (Sutton 1967b, Imhof 1976, Stoddard 1978, Kingery 1998b).

There is a first period of nesting which is concentrated primarily in the upper-Midwestern United States of Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and adjacent Canada in Saskatchewan, and occurs during late May and June (Herkert *et at.* 2001). A second, more widespread, nesting period occurs later in the summer from July-September, with birds expanding out into southern

regions such as Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and into the north-eastern portions of the breeding range which includes states such as Vermont and Massachusetts (Herkert *et al.* 2001).

Sedge Wren habitats are characterized by vegetation and soils that are highly susceptible to drying or flooding caused by annual and seasonal variation in rainfall (Herkert *et al.* 2001). Vegetative succession or disturbance caused by grazing, haying, and planting also imparts a highly transitory character to Sedge Wren nesting habitats (Herkert *et al.* 2001). This habitat instability apparently has led to high mobility and low site tenacity in many areas (Herkert *et al.* 2001). The Sedge Wren's communication system also appears to be adapted to high population mobility, suggesting that opportunistic breeding has occurred for a long time rather than being of recent origin, such as in response to recent agricultural changes or habitat loss (Herkert *et al.* 2001).

The Sedge Wren also is found locally as a resident species from south-central Mexico to Costa Rica, and (formerly) western Panama (Howell and Webb 2010). The areas where the Sedge Wren are found in this region include: in Mexico from southeast San Luis Potosí, southern Nayarit east through northern Michoacán to Puebla and western-central Veracruz, southern Veracruz to western Campeche, and south-eastern Chiapas; south into Guatemala, north-eastern El Salvador, western Honduras, western Nicaragua (Howell and Webb 2010), and east-central Costa Rica at Valle del Guarco [southeast of Cartago], Ochozogo, and occasionally elsewhere (Stiles and Skutch 1989). Formerly in western Panama at west Chiriquí, but unrecorded there since early twentieth century (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989).

The Sedge Wren is also found in South America from Colombia in the western Andes north to Cauca; central Andes north to Tilima; eastern Andes south to Cundinamarca; Santa Marta Mountains.; Sierra de Perija; east of Andes in Meta, Venezuela to north-western Zulia, Merida, Lara, south-western Tachira, Distrito Federal, northern Monagas, southern Bolivar, and Guyana south through the Andes of Ecuador to Peru and central and south-eastern Bolivia, Chile (to Coquimbo), south-eastern Brazil from southern Goias and Minas Gerais, south to the Rio Grande do Sul, and Argentina from Jujuy, Cordoba, and Corrientes south to Tierra del Fuego, including Falkland Islands (Traylor 1988).

North American populations winter along the Atlantic Coast from extreme southern New Jersey (Sibley 1997), coastal Delaware (Hess *et al.* 2000b) south through south-eastern Virginia, eastern North Carolina, central South Carolina, the southern half of Georgia, Florida, the southern half of Alabama, all but north-eastern Mississippi, extreme south-western Tennessee, southern Arkansas, south-eastern Oklahoma, eastern and southern Texas (Herkert *et al.* 2001), and, in northern Mexico, from eastern Chihuahua and central and eastern Durango, east to

Tamaulipas and south to northern Veracruz (Howell and Webb 2010). The northern limit of the wintering range is poorly known and confounded by presence of what appears to be lingering late migrants in some years (Herkert *et al.* 2001). In winter, sporadically occurs as far north as Indiana (Mumford and Keller 1984), Iowa (Dinsmore *et al.* 1984) and Minnesota (Kneeskern 1981). Most regularly found in regions <150 m in elevation and with average January temperatures of >4°C (Root 1988b). Most sightings outside of usual winter range are along river valleys (Root 1988b).

Along the west coast of North America, the Sedge Wren is an accidental vagrant. Most records are from California, where there are 10 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2017). There are only 2 accepted records in Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee which include: 1 territorial bird found from May 30-June 12, 2003 at North Spit in Coos Bay, in Coos County and 1 wintering bird found from January 4-9, 2007 at Luckiamute Landing, in Polk County (OBO 2016). There are no accepted records for Washington by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2017). There are also no accepted records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2017). This species is accidental in British Columbia with 4 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Sedge Wren is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a small sized passerine measuring 11 cm in length, with a wingspan of 13.97 cm, and weighing 9 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is very unique-looking and should be easily identified if encountered. The only species in British Columbia that needs to be eliminated is the widespread, but very different looking Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), which is slightly larger measuring 13 cm in length, with a wingspan of 15.24 cm, and weighing 11 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Sedge Wrens do not have any major plumage differences between adults and juveniles and show no seasonal changes in plumage (Sibley 2000). The sexes look identical, but the male is slightly larger than the female in some traits (Herkert *et al.* 2001).

Sedge Wrens are overall small-bodied birds with a short round-shaped tail. The top of the head and back are black and tawny-brown, streaked with white (Herkert *et al.* 2001). There is a buffy eyebrow with a dark eye line running from behind the eye, back towards the neck (Stokes and Stokes 2010). The throat and belly are whitish, washed with tawny-brown on the breast, sides, and under-tail coverts (Herkert *et al.* 2001). The rump and upper-tail coverts are barred with black; the primaries are dark slaty-brown, with the outer webs irregularly marked with dark brown; and the tail is plain brown banded with black (Cory 1909). The tail is often flicked up (Stokes and Stokes 2010). Juvenile birds hold this plumage from July – August (Stokes and

Stokes 2010). Birds at this age look essentially the same as adults, but have less streaking on the back; little or no streaking on the crown and the under-parts have a pale buffy wash, except on the white throat (Stokes and Stokes 2010). These markings are subtle and would be best noted in high quality photographs or birds that were viewed in the hand.

The song of the Sedge Wren is a very sharp, staccato of chips followed by a more rapid series of “*chap chap chatatat*” or “*chap cahp ch jee jee*” (Sibley 2000). This is less rapid than the staccato call of the Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) (Sibley 2000). The most common call is a very sharp staccato, bouncing “*chadt*” (Sibley 2000). There is also a less intense “*chep*” call given, sometimes in a series like that of the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) (Sibley 2000). There is also a scold call that is given as a quiet, nasal, low, buzzy “*krrt*” (Sibley 2000).

The Sedge Wren is a secretive species and can be hard to find due to its skulky behaviour during the non-breeding season (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is much easier to find when the bird is singing on territory during the breeding season (Herkert *et al.* 2001). As a result of its skulky behaviour, the Sedge Wren is a species that is often detected by its call notes first, or is accidentally kicked up out of its habitat by observers before being seen (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Sedge Wren is an accidental vagrant anywhere in British Columbia with only 4 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first record for the province was an adult male found singing on territory by Gary E. Hornbeck and Ray Wershler, while conducting bird surveys for the Siha Project, in suitable habitat along the Liard River in the Peace River Country, near North-West-Territories border on both June 12 & 15, 2002 (Hornbeck and Wershler 2007). Successful breeding was not confirmed during the survey, but was possible due to the bird’s presence in suitable habitat (Hornbeck and Wershler 2007). The second record for British Columbia was found and photographed by Peter Candido and seen by many others at a well-known passerine vagrant trap at Cecile Park on the University of British Columbia grounds in Vancouver on October 29-30, 2005 (Candido 2006, Cecile 2006a). The third record for British Columbia was found by Gord Gadsden at Cheam Wetlands Regional Park, near Chilliwack in Popkum, and is supported with good field notes on April 20, 2006 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The fourth provincial record was found by Russell Cannings and Jess Findlay along the Esplanade Trails behind the Penticton Yacht Club in Penticton May 14 & 17, 2012 (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

The timing of the summer record fits well with the first period of nesting which is when birds in Alberta and Saskatchewan are on territory (Herkert *et al.* 2001). There is not a great amount of coverage in the northern Peace River Region, thus it is difficult to assess whether this record represents potential expansion of the Sedge Wren westward in appropriate breeding habitat.

Until further research and bio-inventories are conducted in the region this record will be classified as a vagrant record, but in the future this area could have further breeding records. The fall record from Cecile Park in Vancouver fits perfectly into the fall vagrancy pattern of Sedge Wren records from California where 7 out of the 10 accepted records for the state fall between the dates of October 23 – November 12 (Hamilton et al. 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2007).

The 2 spring records of Sedge Wren fit well into the timing of spring migration which begins in early April and peaks in southern regions by mid-May (Herkert *et al.* 2001). The shy and retiring nature of Sedge Wrens makes detection of non-singing birds extremely difficult and likely one reason why there are so few records along the entire west coast of North America. This species is a short distance migrant that stays well east of the Rocky Mountains (Herbert et al. 2001). Future records are likely, but will probably occur infrequently. This species can turn up anywhere in British Columbia, including well-known vagrant traps.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #2: Sedge Wren at Cecile Green Park, Vancouver on October 29, 2005.
Photo © Randy Findlay.



Figure 3: Record #2: Sedge Wren at Cecile Green Park, Vancouver on October 29, 2005.
Photo © Walter Ammann.

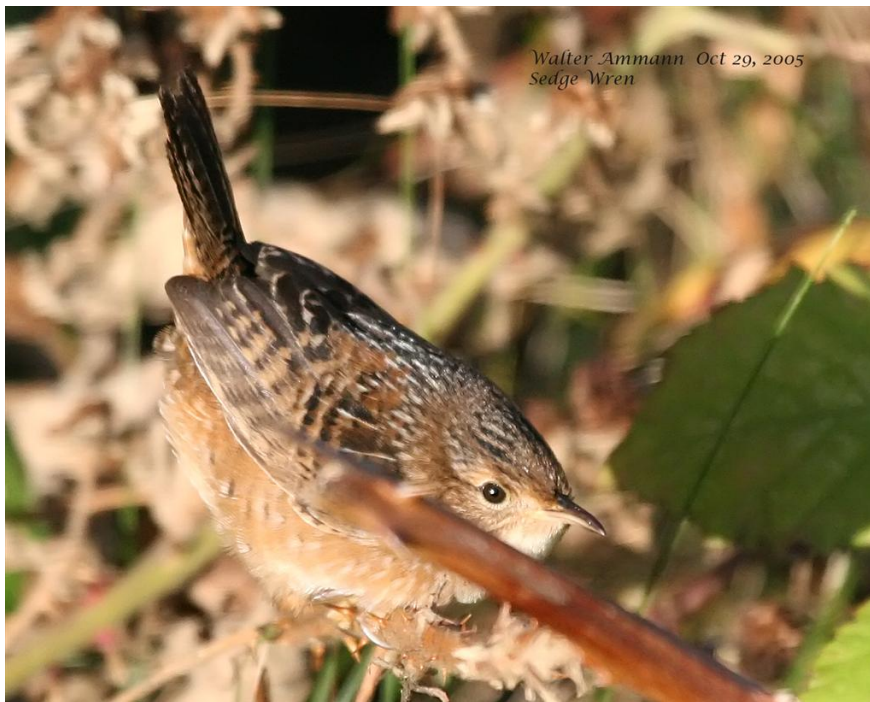


Figure 4: Record #2: Sedge Wren at Cecile Green Park, Vancouver on October 29, 2005.
Photo © Walter Ammann.

Table 1: Records of Sedge Wren for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult male singing June 12 & 15, 2002: Ray Wershler and Gary E. Hornbeck (Siha Project) Liard River Area, Peace Country, near N.W.T. border (Hornbeck and Wershler 2007)
- 2.(1) adult October 29-30, 2005: Peter Candido, mobs (photo) Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Candido 2006, Cecile 2006a)
- 3.(1) adult April 20, 2006: Gordie Gadsden : Cheam Wetlands Regional Park (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult May 14 & 17, 2012: Russ Cannings and Jess Findlay, mobs: Esplanade Trails behind the Penticton Yacht Club, Penticton (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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