

## Status and Occurrence of Lucy's Warbler (*Oreothlypis luciae*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2017.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Lucy's Warbler (*Oreothlypis luciae*) is the smallest warbler species in North America and breeds in the south-western United States from south-eastern California, along the entire Colorado River, locally in the eastern deserts north to Death Valley and Inyo County (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981, Small 1994). This species also breeds in Clark and Lincoln Counties of extreme southern Nevada (Floyd *et al.* 2007); Garfield, Kane, San Juan, and Washington Counties of extreme southern Utah (Hayward *et al.* 1976a, Fagan 1995); western and southern Arizona, excluding the extreme southwest (Phillips *et al.* 1964a, Monson and Phillips 1981); along the Rio Colorado area of extreme north-eastern Baja California Norte and north-western Sonora, Mexico (Wilbur 1987), and north-eastern Sonora (Van Rossem 1945a, Russell and Monson 1998); south-western New Mexico south of the Mogollon Highlands and east to the Rio Grande valley (Hubbard 1978c), and along the lower Rio Grande valley; east to El Paso, Texas in Hudspeth County (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The Lucy's Warbler is also found in the Big Bend region of Texas in Brewster and Presidio Counties, and is listed as a rare migrant (Wauer 1973, Wauer 1985) with 1 confirmed breeding record by Texas Breeding Bird Atlas project and scattered breeding populations from Presidio north along the Rio Grande (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The Lucy's Warbler may also breed in Chihuahua, Mexico, adjacent to the Rio Grande valley of west Texas (Johnson *et al.* 2012). This species is rare or casual in the Trans-Pecos region of west Texas (Oberholser 1974, Rappole and Blacklock 1994); there are also sporadic records from Mesa and Montezuma Counties in south-western Colorado (Bailey and Niedrach 1965, Andrews and Righter 1992).

The Lucy's Warbler nests in close association with riparian mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) (Johnson *et al.* 2012). It breeds in some of the densest concentrations of any non-colonial nesting species in North America, building a miniature nest usually well concealed in a cavity or similar site (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The only other North American species of warbler that nests in a cavity is the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) (Sibley 2000). The Lucy's Warbler also breeds in lowland cottonwood-willow (*Populus-Salix*) riparian gallery forests and, less often, in mid-elevation, sycamore-ash-live oak (*Platanus-Fraxinus-Quercus*) (Johnson *et al.* 2012). These riparian ecosystems have been greatly reduced locally throughout much of the south-western United States, extirpating many breeding populations of Lucy's Warblers (Johnson *et al.* 2012). Brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) may also have affected some already dwindling local populations (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The Lucy's Warbler nests almost entirely in the hot lower Sonoran desert of the south-western United States and north-western Mexico (Johnson *et al.* 2012). It occupies the driest habitat of the 4 south-western lowland-breeding warblers and has been called the "mesquite warbler" (Gilman 1909b) and "desert

warbler" (Monson 1979). The other 3 desert-nesting warblers include: Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*), Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), and Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) which all generally occupy wetter habitats (Johnson *et al.* 2012).

The Lucy's Warbler is a short-distance migrant, whose migration is poorly understood (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). It is thought that most birds probably move directly along coast and mountain valleys between the breeding and wintering grounds (Curson *et al.* 1994). The Lucy's Warbler arrives on the breeding grounds early, often by late March and leaves the breeding grounds early, beginning in early July (Curson *et al.* 1994).

This species winters in a narrow band along the Pacific slope and adjacent interior areas of Mexico from the south Sonora where there are sparse records (Russell and Monson 1998); and northern Jalisco, south to Guerrero, and in smaller numbers south to Oaxaca (Bent 1953b , Schaldach 1963, Howell and Webb 2010). The Lucy's Warbler is a rare fall migrant along the coast to northern California (Curson *et al.* 1994) and is also a rare winter visitor along the California coast from central California south to San Diego County (Small 1994). Although not formerly recorded in winter for the Big Bend region of Texas by Wauer (Wauer 1973, Wauer 1985), it has been found there more recently as a rare, but regular winter visitor (Lasley and Sexton 1991c, Lasley and Sexton 1992c, Johnson *et al.* 2012)

There is one winter record for Baja California on January 24, 1979, at Islas de Todos Santos (Wilbur 1987), and has been found in migration with one April and one October record from other Baja locations (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The Lucy's Warbler is an accidental species in the winter in Arizona, with 2 December records from the Phoenix area and a "crippled bird at Tucson" (Monson and Phillips 1981).

The Lucy's Warbler is an accidental species in eastern North America with an exceptional record from Ipswich, Essex County, Massachusetts on December 1, 1979 (Heil 1981, Veit and Petersen 1993) and a bird photographed at Whitefish Point in Michigan on November 12, 2011 (MBRC 2016). There is also a recently photographed bird from Cheriton Landfill, Oyster, Northampton, Virginia found December 31, 2016- January 5+, 2017 (Swick 2017). The Lucy's Warbler is a casual species in east Texas during the month of December (Oberholser 1974). There are a handful of records along the Gulf Coast with 2 records for Louisiana in November and December (Lowery 1974, Muth 1990a).

Along the west coast of the United States north of California, the Lucy's Warbler is an accidental vagrant. In Oregon, there are 2 accepted winter records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2016). The first Oregon record was found in North Fork Siuslaw River, Lane County, from

December 27, 1986 - January 24, 1987 and the second state record was a bird found in Brookings, Curry County, from January 14 - March 28, 2004 (OFO 2016). In Washington State, there are 2 accepted state records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (WBRC 2016). The first was found at Neah Bay, Clallam County, from November 6 - 7, 2014 and the second was also found at Neah Bay, Clallam County on September 16, 2015 (WBRC 2016). In Idaho, there are also 2 accepted spring records by the Idaho Bird Records Committee (IRBC 2016). The first state record was found on May 11, 1991 in Aberdeen at Sportsman Park in Power County (Kingery 1991) and the second state record was found on May 13, 1997 in Boise in Ada County (IRBC 2016).

The Lucy's Warbler is an accidental species in Canada. The first record for the country was found and photographed in Fort McMurray, Alberta from November 8-10, 2008 (Hudon *et al.* 2009). This species was only very recently added as an accidental vagrant to British Columbia in 2016 (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Lucy's Warbler is covered in all standard North American Field Guides. This is the smallest North American warbler measuring 11 cm in length, and weighing 5.1–7.9 grams (Curson *et al.* 1994, Dunn and Garrett 1997). The Lucy's Warbler is a close relative of both the Nashville Warbler (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla*) which measures 11.5 cm in length and weighs 8.7 grams, and the Virginia's Warbler (*Oreothlypis virginiae*) which measures 11.5 cm in length and weighs 7.8 grams (Curson *et al.* 1994, Sibley 2000). For a complete description and tips on identification between the Lucy's Warbler and both Nashville and Virginia's Warblers, keen observers should read either Curson *et al.* (1994) or Dunn and Garrett (1997).

The Lucy's Warbler is an active species that bobs its tail in a down up motion (Dunn and Garrett 1997). It gleans insects from foliage and twigs, and will often probe blossoms found on Saguaro Cactus (*Carnegiea gigantea*) and Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) (Dunn and Garrett 1997). This species can be shy and hard to see when found individually in thorn-scrub habitat, however birds found in family groups in the early Spring and summer can be quite conspicuous (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

The adult male has a pale gray crown, nape, ear-coverts, and side of the neck (Curson *et al.* 1994). There is a well-defined dark rufous to tawny-rufous rump (Curson *et al.* 1994). The under-parts are whitish, often tinged in a pale buff on the breast on fall and winter birds (Curson *et al.* 1994). Around the dark eye is a white indistinct eye-ring (Curson *et al.* 1994). The lores are whitish (Curson *et al.* 1994). The back and mantle is gray, and uniform with the head (Sibley 2000). The back contrasts with the rufous rump and upper-tail coverts (Curson *et al.*

1994). The wings and tail are blackish with pale gray feather edges, with the later broadest on coverts and tertials (Curson *et al.* 1994). Outer rectrices have a noticeable white spot near the tip (Curson *et al.* 1994). The under-tail coverts are whitish (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill and legs are blackish (Sibley 2000). The adult males in breeding plumage look similar to birds that are in basic plumage, but the latter are slightly buffier on the breast (Curson *et al.* 1994).

The adult female is similar in plumage to the adult male, but the crown patch is restricted or lacking, and overall birds are paler, tawnier coloured (Curson *et al.* 1994). The rump is generally paler and tawnier coloured (Curson *et al.* 1994).

First year males look similar to adult males, but upper-tail coverts are a pale tawny rufous, chestnut on the crown is less extensive (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Birds at this age are browner above and buffier below (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

First year females are almost indistinguishable from first year males (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The very limited pale chestnut on the crown is more or less completely obscured (Dunn and Garrett 1997). The upper-tail coverts are a very pale tawny rufous (Dunn and Garrett 1997).

Juvenile plumage is held primarily from June to September (Johnson *et al.* 2012). Birds at this age are similar to adults in basic plumage except the crown lacks rufous (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The upper-tail coverts have an ochraceous-buff instead of rufous colouration found on older birds (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The median and greater upper-wing coverts are tipped with whitish or pale buffy feathers, producing 2 buffy white wing-bars (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The tertials are edged with cinnamon and the primaries and rectrices edged and tipped with hoary white (Johnson *et al.* 2012). The under-parts are white, not gray (Johnson *et al.* 2012).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Lucy's Warbler is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with both records occurring in 2016. The first record for British Columbia was an adult singing male found and photographed by Craig Sandvig at Selkirk College in Castlegar on May 5, 2016 (C. Sandvig Pers. Obs.). This bird was only in the area briefly and could not be relocated later in the day despite many attempts (C. Sandvig Pers. Obs.). The second record for the province was a female bird found and photographed by Michelle Lamberson at 1055 Sunset Drive in Kelowna on September 25, 2016 (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). This bird was photographed, but the identification had remained unknown for a couple of weeks, until photographs of the bird were posted to Flickr asking for help in the identification (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). Incredibly, what is likely the same individual, was relocated across the street in Rotary Marsh Park, Kelowna, by Chris Charlesworth and Michael Force on November 12, 2016 (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). The observers were looking for a

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) which is a rare, local vagrant and an incredibly late Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*) (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.) Both birds had been photographed and previously been reported in the area, when they came across the Lucy's Warbler (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). Luckily for many keen observers, the Lucy's Warbler remained in the park and surrounding area for a week and was well photographed by many.

The Lucy's Warbler does turn up as an annual fall vagrant in coastal California, especially from Santa Barbara County south, with most records occurring between late August through early November (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Birds moving to the Pacific Coast in the fall, likely explain the vagrants that have turned up in Oregon and Washington (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). Though records in eastern North America, and Alberta, are obviously much farther away than the Pacific Coast, they do fit into this fall vagrancy pattern, as does the bird that turned up in Kelowna. There are currently far fewer spring vagrant records of Lucy's Warblers well north of their breeding range. It is interesting that the Castlegar bird does fit well into the timing of the 2 Idaho records. It is possible that there will be future records of Lucy's Warbler in British Columbia. This species can turn up anywhere in the province, so keen observers should keep their ears and eyes open.

**Table 1: Records of Lucy's Warbler for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult singing male May 5, 2016: Craig Sandvig (photo) Selkirk College, Castlegar (C. Sandvig Pers. Comm.)
- 2.(1) immature/female September 25, 2016: Michelle Lamberson (photo) 1055 Sunset Dr., Kelowna (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.)
  - (1) immature/female November 12-19, 2016: Chris Charlesworth, Michael Force, mobs (photo) Rotary Marsh Park, Kelowna (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.)



Figure 1: Record #1: Lucy's Warbler adult male found at Selkirk College in Castlegar on May 5, 2016. Photo: Craig Sandvig.



Figure 2: Record #2: Lucy's Warbler female found at the Rotary Marsh Park in Kelowna on November 15, 2016. Photo: Don Cecile.



Figure 3: Record #2: Lucy's Warbler female found at the Rotary Marsh Park in Kelowna on November 16, 2016. Photo: Gary Davidson.



Figure 4: Record #2: Lucy's Warbler female found at the Rotary Marsh Park in Kelowna on November 16, 2016. Photo: Gary Davidson.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Don Cecile for editing this manuscript. I wish to thank Craig Sandvig, Don Cecile and Gary Davidson for allowing E-Fauna permission to use their pictures of the Lucy's Warbler in Kelowna. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. Photographs are not to be reproduced, published or retransmitted on any website without the authorization of the photographer.

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