

## Status and Occurrence of Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile. Revised: December 2016.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) is a beautiful thrush found across the Old World (Clement 2000). There are two recognized subspecies with the first, the nominate subspecies (*Turdus iliacus iliacus*) breeding in mixed Birch and mixed Conifer forests from localized areas in Scotland, Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, across European Russia to Eastern Siberia and Kolyma River, with birds breeding as far south as northern Kazakhstan (Clement 2000, Brazil 2009). This species is highly migratory throughout most of its range with birds migrating at night (Jonsson 1992). This species migrates to the wintering grounds in the fall from late September into October with birds migrating north to the breeding grounds between the months of April into early May (Jonsson 1992). The Redwing winters in woods, copses, and open fields from Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, across Western Europe, from western regions of North Africa, and in European Countries that border the Mediterranean Sea east to Turkey, south into Lebanon, Israel and Egypt (Clements 2000). It is also found in southern areas of the Ukraine, southern Russia along the Black Sea, Georgia, and Iran (Clements 2000). This species is accidental in winter in Japan and Korea (Brazil 2009). The second recognized subspecies of Redwing is called (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) (Clements 2000). It breeds in Iceland and the Faeroe Islands, and winters in Northwest Europe (Clements 2000).

In North America, the Redwing is an accidental species found along the East Coast of North America with winter records mostly from Newfoundland and Labrador, but also from Long Island, New York, and Pennsylvania (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Along the West Coast of North America, the Redwing is an accidental vagrant (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is only 1 record for Alaska of a bird found and photographed at Seward from November 15-27, 2011 (Gibson *et al.* 2013). There are only a couple of recent records for British Columbia, which incredibly come from the same location in Victoria (See Table 1). The only other record along the West coast of North America is from Washington State of a bird found and well photographed in Tacoma from December 21, 2004 – March 14, 2005 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). There are no records from Oregon or California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012)

### Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Redwing is covered in some, but not all, standard North American Field Guides. The nominate subspecies (*Turdus iliacus iliacus*) is the most likely subspecies to be found along the West Coast of North America because it has an extensive breeding range across Europe to Siberia, and will be described in this account. The subspecies (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) from Iceland would not be a likely candidate because it has a short migration to

Northern Europe so it won't be described in this account. The Redwing is a smaller thrush, measuring 21 cm in length and weighing between 46 to 80 grams (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is a little smaller than our American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) which measures 25 cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This is a very distinctive species that would be fairly obvious if encountered by any lucky observer in British Columbia. It should be noted that trying to determine the age of Redwings is very difficult in the field and is safer in the hand (Beaman and Madge 1998).

Adult birds have a drab earth brown coloured forehead; this colour extends down onto the wings and to the rump (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Adults have a long white supercilium that starts from the top of the bill and goes past the dark eye before flaring upward (Jonsson 1992). The auricular patch is dark brown with light edges to the feathers (Brazil 2009). There is a distinct white mustache stripe that extends almost all the way around the cheek area (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). There is a dark subocular stripe that borders the outside of most of the white moustache stripe (Brazil 2009). The bill is thick and stout: the upper mandible, including the tip, is black; the lower mandible is yellow at the base (Jonsson 1992). The chin is white with dark blackish streaks that extend down and across the chest and down along the sides to the flanks with some smaller streaks on the otherwise white undertail coverts (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The sides of the breast are rich rusty-red with some dark streaks extending through the reddish colour with the lower belly white (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The legs and feet are pale pink (Jonsson 2009). The wings on adult birds are a drab earthy brown colour with lighter brown-edged wing coverts and tertials (Brazil 2009). In flight, the underside of the wing has bright rusty-red axillaries with light secondaries that extend into the primaries (Jonsson 1992). The upper side of the wing looks brown (Brazil 2009). Adult birds in winter plumage look similar to breeding-plumaged birds, but have a buffy supercilium (Jonsson 1992).

Birds in juvenile and first winter plumage are very similar to adult birds (Brazil 2009). The most important distinguishing feature at this age is found on the wings. The tertials and retained outer greater coverts have white tips to the feather edges that help reveal the bird's age (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

The Redwing has a distinct flight call: a long thin, high-pitched buzzing "tsee" or "shirii", and also an abrupt "chup" or "chittick" (Brazil 2009). This species also has an alarm call that is given as a harder rattling "trrt-trrt-trrt" or "chet-chet-chet" (Brazil 2009).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Redwing is an accidental vagrant species to British Columbia with two recent records (See Table 1). Incredibly both records come from the same general neighbourhood of Victoria, and most likely involve the same bird. The first record was found by a photographer named Ken Orich in a Holly Tree along Tulip Avenue in the Victoria area on December 16, 2013 (K. Orich Pers. Comm.). The photographs taken on the day of the observation didn't come to the attention of observers until March 4, 2014, when they were broadcast on the BC Bird Alert Blog by Russell Cannings (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.). The age of this bird is likely a 1<sup>st</sup> winter bird based on the lack of reddish colour on the sides and the white tips to the wing coverts, but unfortunately there are no pictures known showing the back of the bird's wings (See Figure 1). Because the news of this bird was delayed, it was never relocated despite an extensive search after the news broke in early March 2014 (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.). The second record was found and photographed by Nathan Hentze and Mike Davis while conducting the Victoria Christmas Bird Count on December 19, 2015 (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.). This bird was in a large stand of Holly Trees at 3940 South Valley Drive in the Victoria area which is about a block from where the first record was found in 2013 (See Table 1)! The bird was with wintering American Robins, and was seen by many observers from all over British Columbia and North America (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.) It was observed from December 16, 2015 –April 14, 2016 (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.).

The Redwing is a highly migratory species that would not be expected to occur in British Columbia given that this species breeds as far east as Central Siberia, and migrates away from North America west back to its wintering grounds in the Middle East, Western Europe and North Africa (Brazil 2009). The fact that this species is accidental in Japan and Korea shows that the Redwing does not normally migrate to the east of its breeding range, and instead migrates back through Central Asia to the wintering grounds which takes it in the opposite direction away from North America (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). This is as far away from British Columbia as is possible, making these records even more amazing. There are only four records along the west coast of North America, and all have been found as single birds in the late fall or winter, hanging out with American Robins most often in Holly Trees that have a large amount of berries (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Gibson *et al.* 2013, see Table 1). Although the origins of all these birds are impossible to know for sure, it seems logical that Central Siberia, being the closest region to the West Coast of North America, is the likely place of origin (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.). West coast weather often originates from Central Asia (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). Severe storms can reach our coastline in a very short time period of 48-72 hours (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). This large type of storm pattern could explain what pushed these Redwings well off course and over into North America (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). It is also likely that the weather worked in conjunction with another phenomenon seen in bird migration. It is very likely these Redwings

performed a mirror migration and travelled east towards North America instead of west, which would have put the bird in its normal winter range (Howell *et al.* 2014). This does happen frequently to younger birds that are attempting their first migration (Howell *et al.* 2014). As a result of this reversal in travelling the bird arrived along the west coast of North America (Howell *et al.* 2014). Even though the Redwing is a long distance migrant, it is impossible to know for sure if another lost bird could be located in British Columbia again the future. Only time will tell if these birds were a once in a lifetime fluke or if there will be more observations in the future.



Figure 1: Record #1: Redwing found 240m north of Tulip Ave., Victoria on December 16, 2013. Photo © Ken Orich.



Figure 2: Record #2: Redwing found at 3940 South Valley Drive, Victoria, on December 19, 2015. Photo © Nathan Hentze.



Figure 3: Record #2: Redwing found at 3940 South Valley Drive, Victoria, on December 28, 2015. Photo © Don Cecile.



Figure 4: Record #2: Redwing found at 3940 South Valley Drive, Victoria, on December 28, 2015. Photo © Don Cecile.

**Table 1: Records of Redwing for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) presumed 1<sup>st</sup> winter plumage December 16, 2013: Ken Orich: 240m north of Tulip Ave., Victoria (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 2.(1) presumed adult plumage December 19, 2015 – February 23, 2016: Nathan Hentze and Mike Davis, mobs (photo) 3940 South Valley Drive, Victoria (N. Hentze Pers. Comm.)

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