

The Status and Occurrence of Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Jamie Fenneman.

Introduction and Distribution:

The Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) is widespread and abundant throughout Mexico, Central America, and most of South America, with small numbers breeding north into the extreme southwestern United States in southeastern Arizona and southern Texas along the Rio Grande Valley (Howell and Webb 2010, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Although it is primarily resident throughout its range, small numbers of Tropical Kingbirds regularly disperse north from southern California to southwestern British Columbia each year in the fall (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There are over 32 accepted records for Tropical Kingbird in Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee, so this species is no longer a review species in that state (OFO 2012). In Washington there are 14 accepted records of Tropical Kingbird by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). There are also 22 records accepted under the category of Couch's/Tropical Kingbird where the distinction in identification was not made properly (WBRC 2012). There are 4 fall records for Alaska that all come from Ketchikan along the coast in the Pan Handle of the State (West 2008, Heint and Piston 2009). This species is casual throughout eastern North America, primarily in the fall (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Like in British Columbia, records of Tropical Kingbird occur annually along the outer coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California; and are invariably from areas along the immediate coastline and, in Washington, are more numerous from outer-coastal sites than in the sheltered waters of Puget Sound (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012). The timing of records in Oregon and Washington parallels the timing of records in British Columbia, with most birds occurring during the mid-to-late fall (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2012). On October 19, 2013, a Tropical Kingbird was photographed north of Vancouver Island on the British Columbia mainland at Shearwater on Denny Island (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.). This represents the northern most record for the Province. This recent record helps put in better perspective the 4 records from Ketchikan in southeast Alaska and suggests that Tropical Kingbirds could potentially occur anywhere along the central and northern mainland coast or in the Queen Charlotte Islands. As more observers continue to cover less-checked areas, it is likely these regions of the Province will see their own records of this beautiful flycatcher in the future.

Identification and Similar Species:

The Tropical Kingbird is covered in all standard North American field guides. Adult Tropical Kingbirds are very similar to Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*). The Couch's Kingbird is found from southern Texas south through eastern Mexico to Belize and northern Guatemala (Howell and Webb 2010, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is not known to wander as much as the

Tropical Kingbird, but great care should be given when a suspected Tropical Kingbird is encountered in British Columbia, just to be thorough. The Couch's Kingbird has wandered north, mostly in the fall, to northern Texas, east to Louisiana, Florida and north to Massachusetts and Nova Scotia (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is one record for California of a first-year bird that wintered from December 31, 1997-February 21, 1998, in Fullerton, Orange County (Hamilton *et al.* 2013). The Tropical Kingbird has many subtle, but important, differences to the Couch's Kingbird including that the bill of the Tropical Kingbird is thinner and longer (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head of the Tropical Kingbird is dark gray with the throat a light white colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a dark line that runs from the base of the dark bill through the dark eye and behind the eye (Sibley 2000). The back is a greenish-gray colour and this greenish-gray colour extends onto the chest area (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The breast is a solid, bright banana-yellow colour that extends to the undertail coverts (Sibley 2000). The wings are brown without any wing bars, but with light edges to the feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The undertail coverts are dark as is the tail in colour (Sibley 2000). The tail is long in shape with a clearly notched tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are dark in colour (Sibley 2000). An important difference from the similar looking Couch's Kingbird is that at close range the tips of the folded primary feathers are unevenly staggered on adult birds (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). On the Couch's Kingbird the tips of the folded primary feathers are evenly spaced (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Couch's Kingbird has a broader, thicker, broad-based bill, but this is subtle; and the very best way to distinguish the two species is by voice (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Tropical Kingbird makes a distinctively loud rapid twittering "*pip-pip-pip-pip*" (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The voice of the Couch's Kingbird is very different as their calls are a rolling, shrill call that sounds like "*breeeer*" (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). So far the only skin specimens and photo-documented records along the west coast are of Tropical Kingbird (Campbell *et al.* 1997). The Couch's Kingbird doesn't seem to wander as much but has been found as a vagrant in eastern North America away from its limited breeding range and should always be ruled out when a potential Tropical Kingbird is encountered anywhere in North America (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Both species call year round so, with patience, an observer can hear a bird in the fall to help rule out one species or another (Stouffer and Chesser 1998, Howell and Webb 2010).

In the context of British Columbia, the identification of Tropical Kingbirds is relatively straightforward, although some issues have arisen with the few late-occurring Western Kingbirds that have been discovered on the south coast in October and November (Campbell *et al.* 1997). The white outer tail feathers of Western Kingbird, as well as its greyer breast and proportionally smaller bill, are features that help distinguish it from Tropical Kingbird (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Although the shallowly forked tail of Tropical Kingbird (vs. squared tail in Western Kingbird) is often cited as an identification feature, some late Western

Kingbirds in British Columbia have shown partially moulted tail feathers in which the missing central feathers have given the tail a shallow fork; this feature is, therefore, not considered a conclusive identification feature during the late fall (Zimmer 1985). The confusion between late Western Kingbird and Tropical Kingbird in British Columbia has resulted in some concern being raised regarding undocumented records of “Western Kingbird” from Christmas Bird Counts on the south coast (e.g., Deep Bay, December 27, 1992)(Campbell *et al.* 1997). In this particular example, the extreme rarity of Western Kingbird in the late fall and winter, as well as the occurrence of this bird during a peak year for Tropical Kingbird in British Columbia, suggest that it may instead pertain to that species; however, as no additional information is available regarding this record, it is excluded from further consideration.

Occurrence and Documentation:

The first documented occurrence of a Tropical Kingbird in British Columbia was of an individual collected at French Beach on southwestern Vancouver Island on February 23, 1923 (Kermode 1928, Please see Table 1). The species subsequently went undocumented in the province for almost 50 years, but on October 16, 1972, an individual was photographed near Victoria that represented the second documented occurrence (Tatum 1973, Please see Table 1). The third record was found on October 11, 1976 at Tofino, after which the species began to appear almost annually in small numbers along the south coast of British Columbia (Crowell and Nehls 1977, Please see Table 1). Between 1976 and 2013, a total of 75 records of Tropical Kingbird were made in the province, with between one and three birds appearing most years; the maximum number of records per year is five (occurred in 1992, 2001) (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The annual occurrence of this species is notably cyclical in British Columbia, with peak years alternating somewhat regularly with low years (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 2). The species went unrecorded in the province for eight years between 1976 and 2013 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 2).

Tropical Kingbird records in British Columbia are restricted to the south coast, and are roughly equally split between the outer coast of Vancouver Island (Tofino south to Jordan River) and the Georgia Depression (including southern and eastern Vancouver Island and the Fraser River delta) (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The area of Tofino, Ucluelet, and Pacific Rim National Park on western Vancouver Island has consistently been the most reliable location to find this species in British Columbia, and together these areas have supported roughly one-third of all provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The Strait of Juan de Fuca region, from Victoria north to Jordan River, has also supported a number of records, with the remainder of the provincial records scattered along the eastern coast of Vancouver Island (north to Campbell River) and around the Fraser River delta from Boundary Bay north to Iona Island (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). Almost all observations have been of single birds (although two birds have been observed together on at least one occasion) and are

consistently within a few hundred metres of the immediate shoreline (rarely more than 200 m inland) (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1).

This species has one of the most distinctive seasonal patterns of all rare birds in British Columbia, with all but one of the provincial records occurring during a relatively narrow window in the mid-to-late fall. With the exception of the first provincial record, which occurred during February, all other records have occurred between September 26 and November 30, reaching a sharp and well-defined peak during the last half of October and the first week of November (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 3). Although no individuals have lingered into December, it is possible that a particularly late-appearing or long-staying individual could potentially do so. Individuals commonly remain at the location of observation for up to a week or more following discovery, with the maximum stay recorded in British Columbia being of an individual that occurred at Boundary Bay in the Fraser River delta for 31 days between 26 October and 27 November 2012 (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). The furthest inland record for the Province was a bird found along the Fraser River at Hope on October 28, 2012. Though far inland, this bird was within 75m from the waters of the Fraser River (Toochin 2012c).

Table 1: Records of Tropical Kingbird for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult February 23, 1923: Mr. & Mrs. J. Davies, mobs (RBCM 476:specimen) French Beach, Shirley (Kermode 1928, Slipp 1942)
- 2.(1) age unknown October 16-22, 1972: Ralph Fryer, mobs (BC Photo 240) Cadboro Bay, Saanich (Tatum 1973, Crowell and Nehls 1974)
- 3.(1) age unknown October 11, 1976: Tofino (Crowell and Nehls 1977, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 4.(1) immature October 20-23, 1976: MGS, DMM, JT, mobs: Sea Island, Ferguson Rd., Richmond (Shepard 1977, Mattocks and Hunn 1978, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 5.(1) age unknown October 26-30, 1977: Colwood (Mattocks and Hunn 1978, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 6.(1) age unknown October 22-23, 1978: Beryl Holt: Sandgate Rd., Wier Beach, Metchosin (Hunn and Mattocks 1979, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 7.(1) age unknown November 14-23, 1982: Phylls Becker, mobs (photo) 3338 Wickheim Rd., Colwood (Hunn and Mattocks 1983, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 8.(2) ages unknown October 22-30, 1985: (BC Photo 1043) Ucluelet (Hunn and Mattocks 1986, Campbell 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 9.(1) age unknown October 22-30, 1985: (BC Photo 1043) Tofino (Campbell 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 10.(1) age unknown November 2-4, 1985: (photo) Long Beach (Campbell 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 11.(1) age unknown October 24, 1986: Nanaimo (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 12.(1) age unknown November 5, 1987: Tofino (Campbell 1988, Campbell *et al.* 1997)

- 13.(1) age unknown October 31-November 1, 1989: Tofino (Weber and Cannings 1990, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 14.(1) immature October 28 & November 1, 1990: Richard Swanston & Gerry Ansel, mobs: Brunswick Point, Delta (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 15.(1) age unknown November 2, 1990: Jordan River (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 16.(1) age unknown October 24-November 13, 1990: Tofino (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 17.(1) immature September 26, 1992: Tom Plath, Mike Toochin, mobs: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Siddle 1993, Dorsey 1996b, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 18.(1) age unknown October 16, 1992: *fide Jamie Fenneman*: Campbell River (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.)
- 19.(1) age unknown October 16-17, 1992: Barbara Sedgewick, Doug Innes, Vi Chungranes, Sid Bid Belson: Courtenay (Davidson 1993)
- 20.(1) adult October 10-27, 1992: Rory Patterson, and other observers (photo) Tofino (Bain and Holder 1992)
- 21.(1) adult October 27-November 9, 1992: K. Dawson, and other observers: Central Saanich (Siddle 1993)
- 22.(1) adult November 10-14, 1994: J. Gaskin, and other observers (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon (Bowling 1995, Davidson 1995)
- 23.(1) adult October 15-18, 1995: Don Wilson, and other observers (photo) Courtenay Airpark (Bowling 1996)
- 24.(1) adult October 28, 1995: Rory Patterson: Tofino (Bowling 1996)
- 25.(1) immature October 20-25, 1996: E. Anderson, and other observers: Whiffin Spit, Sooke (Bowling 1997)
- 26.(1) immature October 22-30, 1996: Neil Hughes, and other observers (photo) Jordan River (Bowling 1997, Toochin 2012b)
- 27.(1) adult October 5, 1997: Adrian Dorst, and other observers: Long Beach (Bowling 1998)
- 28.(1-3) various ages October 7 – November 22, 1997: mobs (photo) Tofino (Bain and Holder 1997)
- 29.(2) various ages October mid – November mid, 1997: V. Bahn, and other observers (photo) Ucluelet (Bain and Holder 1997)
- 30.(1) immature October 12, 1997: Emma Theresa, Bill McMillan, John Horchik: Whiffin Spit, Sooke (Bowling 1998, Toochin 2012b)
- 31.(1) adult October 18-25, 1998: Grant Keddie, and other observers (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon (Shepard 1999)
- 32.(1-2) adult October 20-31, 1998: Rory Patterson, and other observers (photo) Tofino (Shepard 1999)
- 33.(1) adult November 21, 1998: mobs: Weir's Beach, Metchosin (Bain and Shannon 1998)
- 34.(1) immature October 17, 1999: D. Johnson, Derrick Marven: Jordan River (Shepard 2000)
- 35.(1) immature October 21, 2000: Jerry Etzkorn: Carmanah Point (Toochin 2012b)
- 36.(1) adult November 6-9, 2000: Mike & Cynthia Shepard, and other observers (photo) Victoria (Bain and Shannon 2000)
- 37.(1) adult October 14-15, 2001: Brian Slater: Ucluelet (Cecile 2002)
- 38.(1) adult October 16-21, 2001: Adrian Dorst: Tofino (Cecile 2002)
- 39.(1) adult October 18-19, 2001: Adrian Dorst: Chesterman's Beach, near Tofino (Cecile 2002)
- 40.(2) immatures October 27, 2001: Jerry Etzkorn: Carmanah Point (Cecile 2002, Toochin 2012b)

- 41.(1) immature November 16, 2001: Derrick Marven: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 42.(1) adult October 7-15, 2002: Brian Slater: Ucluelet (Cecile 2003)
- 43.(1) adult November 17-20, 2002: *fide Victoria Bird Alert*: Swan Lake, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 44.(1) adult October 23-24, 2003: Brian Slater: Ucluelet (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 45.(1) adult October 8, 2005: David Allinson, and other observers (photo) Rocky Point RPBO, Metchosin (Cecile 2006)
- 46.(1) adult October 22, 2006: *fide Jeremy Gatten* (photo) Macauley Point, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 47.(1) adult November 5-6, 2006: Mike Yip, and other observers (photo) Nanoose Golf Course, Nanoose (Cecile 2007)
- 48.(1) adult October 15-24, 2007: Rory Patterson, mobs (photo) Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 49.(1) adult November 4-24, 2007: Chris Saunders, and other observers (photo) Martindale Flats (Tatum 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 50.(1) adult November 16, 2007: *fide Neil Robins*: Nanaimo River Estuary, Nanaimo (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 51.(1) adult November 30, 2007: *fide Colin Bartlett* (photo) Hornby Island (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 52.(1) immature October 30-November 26, 2008: Ryan Johnston, mobs (photo) 64th Street near 28th Ave, Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2012a)
- 53.(1) immature November 23, 2008: Jim Hamilton: Cheewhat River along West Coast Trail (Toochin 2012b)
- 54.(1) adult male October 15-19, 2009: Rick Toochin, and other observers (photo) Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 55.(1) adult October 19, 2009: Jerry Etzkorn: Carmanah Point (Charlesworth 2010, Toochin 2012b)
- 57.(1) adult September 26, 2010: Pierre Geoffray, and other observers (photo) Englishmen Estuary, Parksville (Charlesworth 2011)
- 58.(1) adult October 5, 2010: Daniel Mantle, mobs (photo) Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult October 10-12, 2010: Kevin Louth, mobs (photo) Brunswick Point, Delta (Charlesworth 2011, Toochin 2012a)
- 59.(1) adult October 28, 2010: Bill Pednault (photo) Ed McGregor Park, Sooke (Toochin 2012b)
- 60.(1) adult *circa* November 1, 2010: *fide Agnes Lynn* (photo) Ocean's Edge, Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 61.(1) adult October 20, 2012: Derek Avery, mobs (photo) near Blackie Spit, White Rock (Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult October 26-November 27, 2012: Wes Aslin, mobs (photo) foot of 112th & 96th Street, Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2012a)
- 62.(1) adult October 28 & November 3, 2012: Rick Toochin & Jack Delair: Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 63.(1) adult November 1, 2012: Ian Cruickshank: Cattle Point, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 64.(1) adult November 3, 2012: Gordon Curry: 1st Street, Sointula, Malcolm Island (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 65.(1) adult November 10, 2012: Steven Roias, and other observers: Panama Flats, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2013b)

- 66.(1) adult October 4-8, 2013: Chris Saunders, and other observers (photo) Swan Lake, Victoria
(R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 67.(1) adult October 5, 2013: Arnold Skei: Mission Point (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 68.(1) adult October 6, 2013: Guy Monty, and other observers: Wickaninnish Beach, Pacific Rim
National Park (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 69.(1) adult October 10, 2013: Steve Baillie: Panama Flats, outside Victoria
(R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 70.(1) adult & calling October 12, 2013: Rick Toochn (FN) Fish Trap Creek, Abbotsford
(R. Toochn Pers. Comm.)
- 71.(1) adult October 13, 2013: Jerry Etkorn: Carmanah Lighthouse (J. Etkorn Pers. Comm.)
- 72.(1) adult October 21-28, 2013: Cathy Carlson, mobs (photo) Whiffin Spit, Sooke
(C. Carlson Pers. Comm.)
- 73.(1) adult October 19, 2013: Sharon Storr (photo) Shearwater, Denny Island
(R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 74.(1) adult October 24, 2013: mobs: John Road, North Saanich (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 75.(1) adult October 25, 2013: mobs (photo) Cattle Point, Victoria (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)

Table 2: Annual number of Tropical Kingbird records in British Columbia:

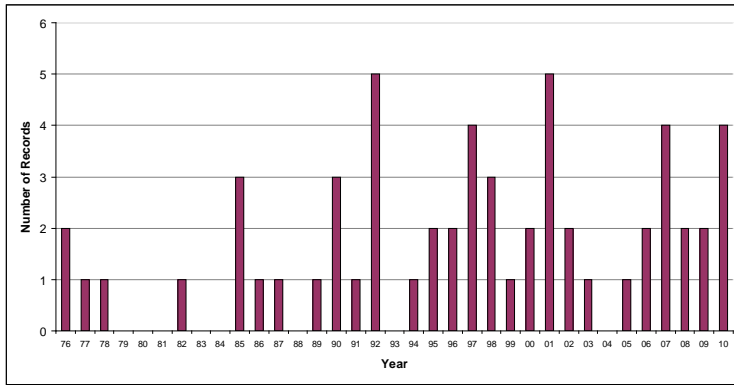


Table 2. Note the strongly cyclical nature of the records, with peak years alternating with periods of relatively few (or no) records.

Table 3: Seasonal distribution of Tropical Kingbird records in British Columbia:

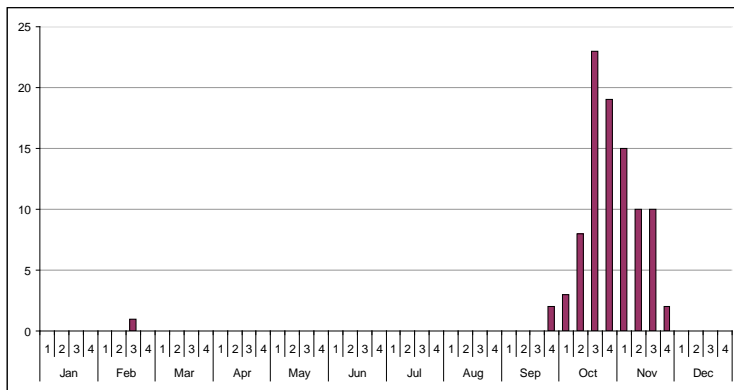


Table 3. Note the sharply defined fall occurrence of this species with the peak being late October to early November.

Table 4: Recent Photographic Records of Tropical Kingbird from British Columbia:



Figure 1: Record # 54: Tropical Kingbird at Jordan River on October 15, 2009. Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 2 & 3: Record # 54: Tropical Kingbird at Jordan River on October 19, 2009. Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 4 & 5: Record # 54: Tropical Kingbird at Jordan River on October 20, 2009. Photos © Mike Ashbee.



Figure 6: Record # 72: Tropical Kingbird at Whiffin Spit, Sooke on October 21, 2013. Photo © Cathy Carlson.



Figure 7: Record # 72: Tropical Kingbird at Whiffin Spit, Sooke on October 21, 2013.
Photo © Cathy Carlson.



Figure 8: Record # 72: Tropical Kingbird at Whiffin Spit, Sooke on October 21, 2013.
Photo © Sandy Bowie.



Figure 9: Record # 72: Tropical Kingbird at Whiffin Spit, Sooke on October 23, 2013.
Photo © Mike Ashbee.

Acknowledgements:

We wish to thank Sandy Bowie, Cathy Carlson, Jerry Etzkorn and Russell Cannings for providing information on recent Tropical Kingbird observations from around coastal areas of the Province. We wish to thank Barbara McKee for editing the article. We also wish to thank Mike Ashbee, Sandy Bowie and Cathy Carlson for allowing us to use their photographs for this article. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law.

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