

The Status and Occurrence of Western Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Western Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) is found from the western United States to southern Mexico (Curry *et al.* 2002). The Western Scrub-Jay subspecies that has turned up in British Columbia is (*A. c. californica*) and are resident in southwestern Washington State, south through parts of coastal and central Oregon, to southwestern California, extreme west-central Nevada, and south to southern Baja California (Curry *et al.* 2002). In Washington State, the Western Scrub-Jay has been slowly expanding its range northward since the 1990s with records spilling into the Lower Mainland and south-western corner of British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Wahl *et al.* 2005). The number of Western Scrub-Jay records in British Columbia has dramatically increased each year since 1993. This species is currently a species of casual occurrence but its status is rapidly changing and it may become a rare regular resident species in the Lower Mainland region from Vancouver to Chilliwack (Toochin *et al.* 2014, Please see Table 1.). Western Scrub-Jays have recently been found nesting in Maple Ridge (summer of 2014, P. Levesque pers. comm.). This represents the first confirmed nest record for Canada (P. Levesque pers. comm.). The Western Scrub-Jay has occurred in eastern Washington State and has been reported in the South Okanagan and in the East Kootenay of British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1.).

The interior subspecies of Western Scrub-Jay (*A.c. woodhouseii*) is resident from southeastern California, throughout Nevada, southern Idaho, and southeastern Wyoming, into Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, West Texas and central Mexico. Vagrant birds have turned up in northern Wyoming, central Kansas, Illinois, west-central Indiana and Manitoba (Curry *et al.* 2002).

Identification and Similar Species

The birds that have been documented in the Lower Mainland and south coastal British Columbia have been of the subspecies (*Aphelocoma c. californica*) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). These birds are the more colorful of the two Western Scrub-Jay subspecies. All Western Scrub-Jays are distinguished by their long body shape, long tails and lack of any crest (Sibley 2000). Adults of the “coastal group” have a large dark thick bill with a dark facial patch; with a white supercilium that goes from the bill base over the eye (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The crown, nape and side of the neck are a rich deep blue colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back has a brownish patch on the back that is quite large in size (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rump and upper tail is a rich blue colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat is white (Sibley 2000). It is separated by a partial blue breast band; the remainder of the breast is bright white extending down to the undertail coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the tail is

grayish coloured (Sibley 2000). The legs are long in length and are black in colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

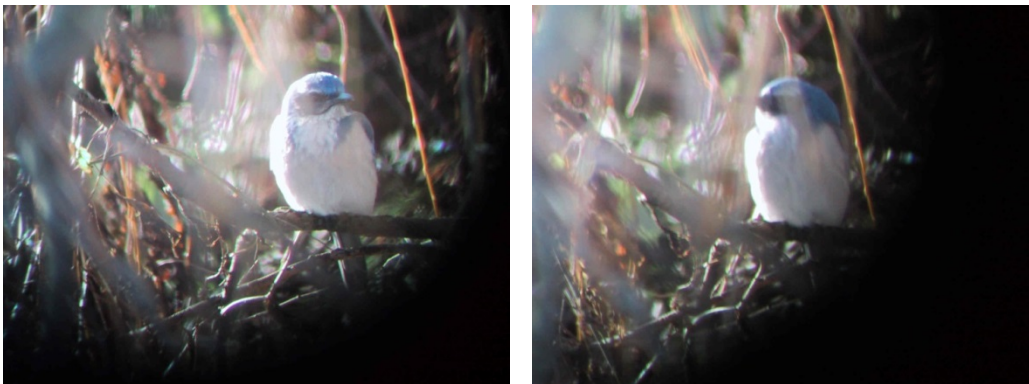
The adult Western Scrub-Jays of the interior subspecies (*A.c. woodhouseii*) are similar looking to coastal birds (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In overall colour, the blue is paler and not as dark or rich in colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The breast is gray right down to the vent and there is blue on the undertail coverts (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is, on average, smaller and a bit thinner to the coastal birds (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back colour of the interior birds is a light gray-blue colour that covers a smaller area on the back than the darker coloured coastal birds (Sibley 2000).

The juvenile plumage differs markedly from that of adults. From fledging to first prebasic molt, the young Western Scrub-Jay has a grayish-brown or brown head with no blue and only a hint of a white supercilium (Curry *et al.* 2002). There is often a brown collar across the breast and a reduced whitish throat patch (Curry *et al.* 2002). This plumage is held briefly before birds start changing to more adult like plumage (Curry *et al.* 2002). Observers should watch for this plumage in British Columbia as it could mean that birds are breeding in the area. The Western Scrub-Jay has a distinct harsh sounding call that sounds like “shreeeeenk” that is often repeated (Sibley 2000). It also gives a repeated series of “wenk wenk wenk wenk” or “kkew kkew kkew” or “sheeyuk sheeyuk” calls (Sibley 2000). Birds of the interior group are lower pitched in sound than birds of the coastal group (Sibley 2000).

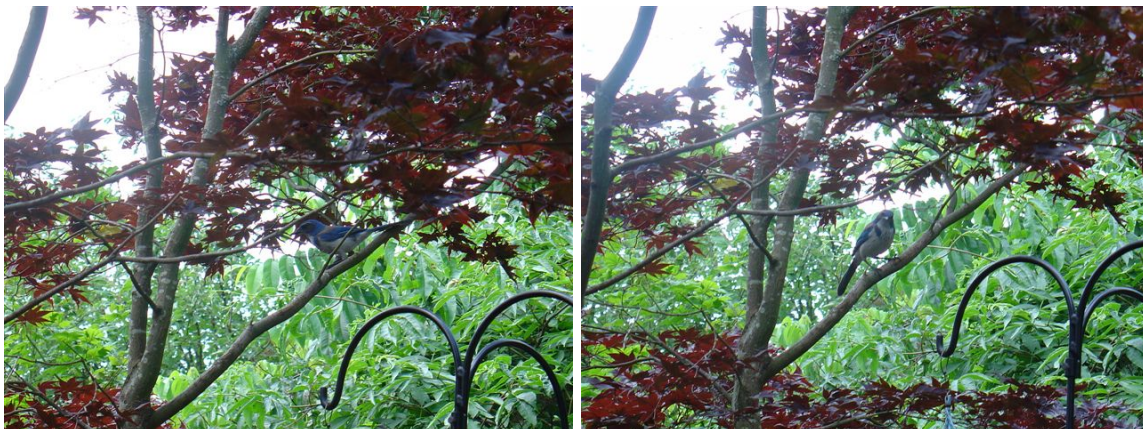
Occurrence and Documentation

The Western Scrub-Jay has slowly been expanding its range north in Washington State for the past 20 – 30 years (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Since 1993, the number of records in British Columbia has increased exponentially. Records occur almost every year and in most years there are multiple occurrences (Toochin *et al.* 2014, Please see Table 1). In British Columbia, there are now 36 provincial records with 30 from the Lower Mainland and the South Okanagan with 3, Squamish with 1 and the Sunshine Coast with 1 record (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All of these coastal records involve Western Scrub-Jays of the coastal subspecies. Birds reported from the South Okanagan have also been put into this group based on the descriptions provided by the observers. The only Western Scrub-Jay of the interior subspecies recorded in the Province of a bird well described by Martin Calver at the snow ridges between 5 mile and Ketutl Basins in the East Kootenays on June 15, 2003 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This is the furthest east that Western Scrub-Jay has been reported in British Columbia and likely came from the southern Idaho region where the Western Scrub-Jays are of the interior subspecies. The Western Scrub-Jay was recently found nesting in the summer of 2014 in the Maple Ridge area representing a new breeding species for both British Columbia and Canada (P. Levesque pers. comm.) The

adult birds were feeding 2 fledglings and were well photographed and confirmed by many observers (J. Fenneman pers. comm.). It is highly likely that more Western Scrub-Jays will be found breeding in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia given the dramatic increase in observations, reports with multiple birds present, the frequency of occurrence during late spring and early summer, and the fact that some individuals have remained for several seasons. The Western Scrub-Jay, like other jays, readily comes to bird feeders. The area of the Lower Mainland is perfect for them as this species likes open suburban areas, such as city parks or areas with open gardens (Curry *et al.* 2002). This species can occur in any month of the year in the Lower Mainland and turn up in any city park or backyard, especially where there is a bird feeder. Observers should always be on the lookout for Western Scrub-Jays throughout the southwestern corner of the Province in the future as they are likely to increase in numbers and are slowly becoming part of the natural avifauna of southwestern British Columbia.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #6: Western Scrub-Jay in Ladner on December 28, 2003.
Photos © Rick Toochn.



Figures 3 & 4: Record #7: Western Scrub-Jay in Squamish on June 28, 2003.
Photos © Marcia and Grant Danielson.



Figure 5 & 6: Record #33: Western Scrub-Jay juveniles at Maple Ridge on July 6, 2014. First nest record for Canada. Photos © Al Russell.



Figures 7 & 8: Record #35: Western Scrub-Jay at the corner of MacDonald Road and Ferguson Road, Sea Island, Richmond on February 21, 2014. Photos © Greg Stuart.



Figure 9 & 10: Record #35: Western Scrub-Jay at the corner of MacDonald Road and Ferguson Road, Sea Island, Richmond on February 21, 2014. Photos © Greg Stuart.

Table 1: Records of Western Scrub-Jay for British Columbia

- 1.(1) adult November 8, 1981: (photo: BCPM: 747) South Langley (Campbell 1982, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 2.(1) adult July 28, 1993- December 1, 1995: Gloria Sven, mobs (photo) Musqueam Pk., Vancouver (Bowling 1994, Davidson 1994, Dorsey 1996, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 3.(1) adult December 30, 2001- March 2, 2002: Fred & Marian Visentin, mobs (photo) 1413 Stewart Place, Pt. Coquitlum (Toochin 2012a)
- 4.(1) adult October 5-12, 2002: Kathy Stewart (photo) Chehalis Estuary, Agassiz Area (Cecile 2003, Toochin *et al.* 2014, Toochin 2012b)
- 5.(1) adult June 15, 2003: Martin Carver: snow ridges between 5 mile and Ketutl Basins, East Kootenay (*interior subspecies*)(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 6.(1) adult October 19, 2003-April 11, 2004: Diane Kehoe, mobs (photo) 4126 River Road, Ladner (Cecile 2004a, Toochin 2012a)
- 7.(1) adult June 23, 2004-April 19, 2005: Marcia and Grant Danielson (photo) 40195 Kalodon Road, Squamish (Cecile 2004b, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
(1) adult March 27, 2005: Byron Andres: Garibaldi Highlands, a subdivision of Squamish (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 8.(1) adult July 23, 2005: Rick Toochin: flew across Highway 1 near Mount Lehman Exit, Abbotsford (Cecile 2005, Toochin 2012b, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 9.(1) adult December 17, 2005 – February 3, 2006: Roy Lukow, mobs (photo) 45922 Higginson Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012b)
- 10.(1) adult November 28- December 1, 2006: mobs: 13100 block of 107A Ave, Surrey (Toochin 2012a)
- 11.(1) juvenile - adult June 20, 2009-June 6, 2011: Roger Craik, mobs: 21900 block Lougheed Hwy near Carshill Road, Maple Ridge (Toochin 2012a)
- 12.(1) adult November 11, 2009 – December 27, 2009: *fide Tony Greenfield*, mobs (photo) Gower Point Road, Gibsons, Sunshine Coast (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 13.(1) adult May 10-18, 2010: Rocky Hildebrand (photo) 200th St & 24th Ave right beside the Fernridge Hall, Langley (Toochin 2012a)
- 14.(1) adult September 30, 2010: Jay Black (photo) Blackie Spit, White Rock, Surrey (Toochin 2012a)
- 15.(1) adult October 1, 2010: Peter Candido: Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 16.(1) adult October 2, 2010: Jessica Baird (photo) Promontory Hill Area, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012b)
- 17.(1) adult October 14, 2010: mobs: near 160th Street & 8th Ave, Surrey (Toochin 2012a)
- 18.(1) adult October 28-November 5, 2010: mobs (photo) Strathcona Park, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)

- (2) adults November 20-April 6, 2010: mobs (photo) Strathcona Park, Vancouver
(Toochin 2012a)
- 19.(1) adult November 2, 2010-January 25, 2011: Russ Cannings, mobs (photo) Terra Nova Park,
Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult May 10, 2011: Les Lee (photo) Terra Nova Park, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 20.(1) adult November 3-4, 2010: RT, BM, mobs: 9800 block of Chapman Road, Rosedale
(Toochin 2012b)
- 21.(1) adult December 4, 2010: Al and Donna MacKenzie: 51st Ave and Salish Drive,
Musqueam, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 22.(1) adult December 27, 2010: *fide Russ Cannings*: Princeton (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 23.(1) adult December 31, 2010: *fide Russ Cannings*: Osoyoos (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 24.(1) adult January 4-5, 2011: Gordie Gadsden, mobs: Neilson Park, east Mission
(Toochin 2012b)
- 25.(1) adult September 19, 2011: Russell Cannings: Boundary Bay Airport Subdivision, Delta
(Toochin 2012a)
- 25.(1) adult September 24, 2011: Gordie Gadsden: Greendale (Toochin 2012b)
- 26.(1) adult November 28, 2011: Gordie Gadsden, mobs: Neilson Park, east Mission
(Toochin 2012b)
- 27.(1) adult April 1, 2012: mobs: Bridal Falls (Toochin 2012b)
- 28.(1) adult September 13, 2012-February 17, 2013: Ryan MacKay, mobs (photo) 7th Ave & 18th
St., near Grimston Park., & area, New Westminister (Toochin 2012a)
- (1) adult January 25, 2014-February 10, 2014: Mike and Sharon Toochin, mobs (photo)
between Hamilton Street and 7th Ave., New Westminister (P. Levesque pers. comm.)
- 29.(1) adult October 22-23, 2012: *fide Laurie Rockwell*: Atkins Ave., Summerland
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 30.(1) adult February 3, 2013: John & Myra Toochin: 959 West 58th Ave., Vancouver
(J. Toochin pers. comm.)
- 31.(1) adult March 30, 2013: Kevin Louth: 95th Ave and Grant Place, North Delta
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 32.(1) adult September 9-11, 2013: Maureen Hannay, mobs (photo) near Hamilton St., and 18th
Ave., New Westminister (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 33.(1-2) adults September 24-October 20, 2013: Graeme Stevens (photo) 2206 Dwedney Trunk
Road, Maple Ridge (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- (2) adults February 3-10, 2014: Roger Craik (photo) Maple Ridge area
(P. Levesque pers. comm.)
- (4) 2 adults /2 fledglings June 18-July 10, 2014 (photo) Maple Ridge area
[first confirmed nesting record for British Columbia and Canada]
(J. Fenneman pers. comm.)

- 34.(1) adult October 30, 2013: John Vooy's: Bellevue Crescent, Abbotsford
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 35.(1) adult February 21, 2014: Greg Stuart (photo) MacDonald Road and Ferguson Road, Sea
Island, Richmond (G. Stuart pers. comm.)
- 36.(2) adults February 24, 2014: Rick Toochin: Fish Trap Creek, Abbotsford
(R. Toochin pers. comm.)

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