

# First record of a Red-flanked Bluetail for Canada

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**Abstract:** A first-winter or female Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) found, described, and sketched in New Westminster, B.C., on 2013 January 13 is the first record of this species for B.C. and Canada.

**Key words:** extralimital occurrence, British Columbia, Red-flanked Bluetail, *Tarsiger cyanurus*

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## Introduction

The Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) is a small Asian songbird of the family Muscicapidae, or Old World Flycatchers. It is also known as the Orange-flanked Bush-Robin. It breeds in boreal and temperate forest from Finland east through northern Russia to Siberia, Kamchatka, Sakhalin Island, the Commander and Kuril Islands, and south into Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan. It winters in southeast Asia, including Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina. It is resident in Japan except for Hokkaido, and is a common migrant in east Asia (Harrison 1982; Brazil 2009; Clements *et al.* 2014).

Spring and fall records in western Europe have grown in recent decades, in particular from the British Isles; as of 2014 July, of 400 records outside Finland and Russia, nearly a third were from Britain. Its breeding range in Finland appears to be expanding and there is a single breeding record each for Sweden, Norway, and Estonia (Mikkola and Rajasärkkä 2014). It is also a vagrant in the Middle East to Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates (Porter and Aspinall 2010).

The Red-flanked Bluetail was first recorded in North America on 1982 June 5 from Alaska, on Attu Island in the Aleutian Islands (Gibson 1982). Since then it has been reported rarely but regularly in spring and fall from the Aleutians and other islands in the Bering Sea. There was a single mainland Alaska record of an adult male, in spring (Tobish and Isleib 1992), which is notable as the sole record to date of an adult male in alternate plumage. South of Alaska there were two records, both from islands off the coast of California in fall (Howell *et al.* 2014), and very recently another record was reported from Washington in spring (Wright 2015).

## Field Observations

On the morning of 2013 January 13 I visited Queen's Park in New Westminster, British Columbia. While walking through an area of open conifer woods, I noticed a small bird moving and flying near the ground and around the bases of trees. Its size, shape, and motion suggested a Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), which is what I expected to see when I raised my binoculars.

For a moment or two my brain tried and failed to turn the bird into a Hermit Thrush. In fact I could not place the bird to any North American species. To my eye it was very like one of the round-bodied "robins" of the Old World (*e.g.* *Erithacus*, *Luscinia*) but otherwise the bird was entirely unfamiliar.

I examined the bird as long and carefully as it would allow, then made a quick sketch with notes from which I later made colour drawings (Fig. 1). I sent the images with the following written description to George Clulow (Burnaby, B.C.):

*It flew and foraged on or near the ground (always below eye level) beneath tall conifers (not much understorey, but it kept close to trunks and what understorey there was). The sun was out, but conditions were more or less dim under the trees. Time approx 10 am....*

*Small, dark, slender bill. Round (almost spherical) body, rather long legs. Upperparts dark cool brown, almost olive-tinted. This hue contrasted noticeably with the dark slate blue-grey of the tail (the bluish slate colour of a male varied thrush's dark parts). The tail was longish and somewhat notched. I did not see any white outer feathers or other tail*

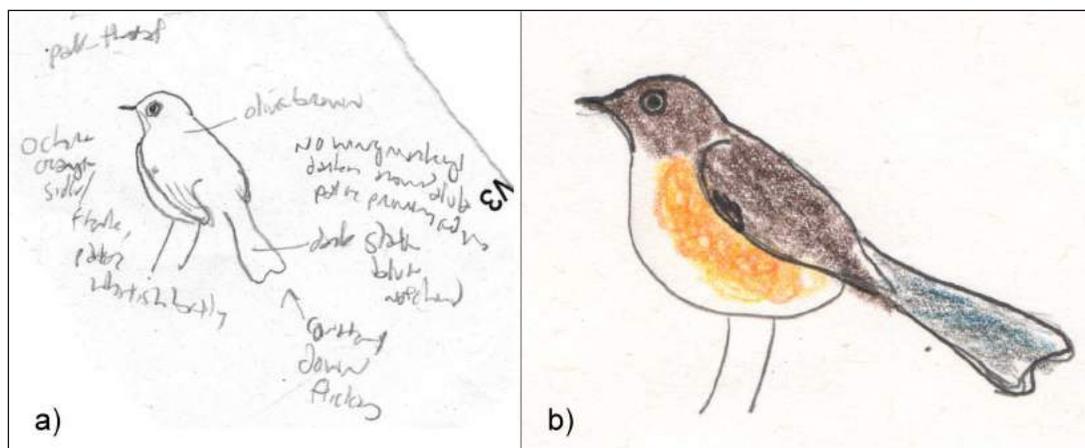


Figure 1. Pencil sketch with notes made by the author in the field (a) and with colours made the same day at home (b), New Westminster, B.C., 2013 January 13.

marks, but the bird flicked its tail downward quickly and constantly.

There were no apparent wing bars or other wing marks other than vague pale edges on flight feathers, and a small blackish area around the alula. The wings were relatively short and drooped below the tail.

Bright, well-defined white eye-ring around dark eye. Almost tear-drop shaped, like some flycatchers. Or a solitaire....

The orange along the flanks was quite bright, saturated, but quickly faded to pale whitish at center chest/belly/throat. No pattern of spots or streaks below or above.

The bird was silent. I watched for about five minutes before it disappeared towards McBride/6th Ave (it was not inclined to sit still). I spent a good half hour or so trying to relocate but without success. I listened for any unfamiliar calls but also without success.

George Clulow shared this information with Mike Toochin (Richmond, B.C.). Both individuals are experienced with Asian birds and based on my notes and drawings came to the same tentative identification. They and a small team of other birders were able to relocate and photograph the bird by the following day, thereby confirming their hypothesis (Clulow 2013). The bird was identified as a first-winter or female Red-flanked Bluetail, the first record of this species for British Columbia and Canada. It was also the second record for mainland North America and the third south of Alaska. The bird remained in Queen's Park for several weeks and was last seen 2013 March 26 (Hentze 2014), making it the first overwintering record for North America (Fig. 2). The sighting was reported online (Clulow 2013, Toochin no date) but not formally published.

Queen's Park is located in an urban residential area of New Westminster about one kilometre north of the Fraser

River. The park extends to 30 ha and contains various amenities, sports facilities, gardens and other ornamental plantings, but the bird stayed mostly within a strip of open coniferous forest along the northwest border of the park. Native trees and shrubs predominate in this area and include Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), western redcedar (*Thuja plicata*), vine maple (*Acer circinatum*), beaked hazel (*Corylus cornutus*), dull Oregon-grape (*Mahonia nervosa*), and red huckleberry (*Vaccinium parvifolium*). Ground cover is concentrated around the bases of trees; the otherwise open ground is covered with grass and other small plants, duff, and scattered stumps and fallen logs. This area of Queen's Park is very similar to urban park habitat in Japan where the Red-flanked Bluetail has been observed (Pers. comm., G. Clulow, Burnaby, B.C., 2013 Jan 13).

During this period the bird was seen by hundreds of people from various parts of Canada and the United States. I observed it on seventeen occasions up to 2014 March 24. The bird was extensively photographed and many images were posted online clearly showing diagnostic field marks



Figure 2. Red-flanked Bluetail, New Westminster, B.C., 2013 February 16. Photo: Raymond Ng.

of a first-winter or female Red-flanked Bluetail: orange flanks, blue tail, white eye-ring, and well-defined white throat. The characteristic downward tail flicking was evident in video footage posted online.

The Red-flanked Bluetail has two main call notes: a clear, thin, high-pitched *peep* and a low, unvoiced, hard, scraping *trk*. The Queen's Park bird was largely silent but both calls were reported on occasion. I, along with two other observers, first heard the *peep* call on 2013 March 10. On that day we watched the bird at a distance of about 10-15 m as it foraged in and around salmonberry brush (*Rubus spectabilis*). We also noted the bird's body and throat feathers moving in synchronized rhythm for short continuous periods, suggesting vocalization, but no sound was heard. One of the observers took a brief video on which these motions are clearly visible (Shaw 2013). On 17 and 23 March I again observed the bird appear to vocalize inaudibly for continuous periods. It is possible that this vocalization was subsong, and if so, may indicate that the bird was a male. There are reports of (audible) subsong in a first-winter Red-flanked Bluetail that overwintered near Marshfield, Gloucestershire, U.K. in 2014 (Colenutt 2014; Hayes 2014) and "apparent" subsong has been observed in China in spring (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005). The Red-flanked Bluetail exhibits delayed plumage maturation: males in first-year plumage are known to sing, hold territory, and breed (Morimoto *et al.* 2005; Leader 2009). Female bluetails are reported to sing "weakly" in response to male song during the nesting period (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005), but whether or not they sing in other contexts is not known to me. Song in passerines is typically, though not exclusively, a male behaviour.

## Conclusion

The only similar species is the Himalayan Bluetail (*Tarsiger rufilatus*) of the Himalayas and southwestern China, which was recently split from the Red-flanked Bluetail (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005; Luo *et al.* 2014). The Himalayan Bluetail is a short-distance, altitudinal migrant or resident within a small and geographically discrete range; thus North American bluetail records are less likely to be of this species than of the widespread, highly migratory Red-flanked Bluetail. The BCFO Bird Records Committee thought that Himalayan Bluetail was a remote possibility for the Queen's Park bird but decided to consult ornithologist Pamela Rasmussen, an expert on Asian birds and first author of *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide*. Dr. Rasmussen is experienced with bluetails and based on plumage characters confirmed that the Queen's Park bird was a Red-flanked Bluetail (Hentze 2014).

The possibility of escape from captivity is unlikely. The Red-flanked Bluetail is an insectivorous species and

not usually kept in captivity due to the difficulty of providing for such a diet (for this reason captive birds are commonly seed-eating species). The Queen's Park bird did not display wear or damage to plumage or other body parts, which can indicate that a bird has been in captivity. As well, the Queen's Park bird fits into an established pattern of occurrence for this species in North America. While these observations do not confirm the provenance of the Queen's Park bird, they are consistent with the hypothesis that the bird was wild. (Pers. comm., G. Clulow, Burnaby, B.C., 2015 Mar 7).

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