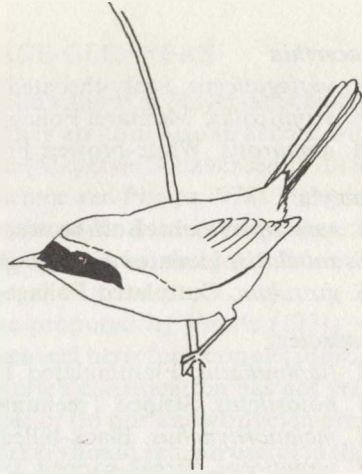


Comments on the Peninsular Yellowthroat

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Although its range is small and its taxonomic future is clouded, this bird still deserves better treatment than it receives in the field guides.

Of the several endemic bird taxa harbored by the peninsula of Baja California, Mexico, only three are currently regarded as full species by the Committee on Taxonomy and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union: the Black-fronted or Xantus' Hummingbird *Hylocharis xantusii*, Gray Thrasher *Toxostoma cinereum*, and Peninsular or Belding's Yellowthroat *Geothlypis beldingi*. Some of the endemic forms now regarded as subspecies (e.g., "San Lucas" Robin *Turdus migratorius confinis*, "Baird's" Junco *Junco phaeonotus bairdi*) are also very distinctive, and well worth the attention of the visiting birder. Hopefully the reader will not immediately lose interest in the Peninsular Yellowthroat when I predict that it is almost certain to join the ranks of the distinctive subspecies here by being "lumped" with the Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*. My purpose in this note, however, is not to make any taxonomic recommendations (I have not studied the situation in enough depth for that), but rather to clarify a couple of points for the observer who seeks acquaintance with this localized bird.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITATS

It is possible that there are two disjunct populations of Peninsular Yellowthroats, one in southern and one in central Baja California. The latter has been designated a distinct subspecies, *Geothlypis beldingi goldmani*, by Oberholser (1917). The validity of this second race has been disputed, for reasons to be discussed later.

In his description of the race *goldmani*, Oberholser pointed out the apparent gap in the Peninsular Yellowthroat's range. The birds which he identified as *goldmani* all came from the section of the peninsula lying between the latitudes of about 26° and about 27° 20' N; all other specimens known at that time (nominate *beldingi*) were from south of 24° N, about the latitude of La Paz. A decade later, when Grinnell (1928) published his distributional work on the birds of Baja, he had no records to fill the

hiatus between the two populations. Behle (1950), in discussing all of the yellowthroats in western North America, presented a map which showed a continuous population of *beldingi* occupying the entire southern half of the peninsula; however, he was unable to cite any localities bridging the gap noted above. Finally, in the standard work on Mexican bird distribution, Miller *et al.* (1957) described the ranges of the two races (and the gap between) in essentially the same terms as had Grinnell (*op. cit.*).

It seems most likely (as first suggested by Oberholser 1917) that Peninsular Yellowthroats do occur in the section between 24° and 26° N latitude. However, I have not seen any published records of such, and my own travels in this part of the peninsula have been too brief for any meaningful exploration. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who has data (positive or negative) bearing on this. For the purposes of this note, however, I will continue to assume that there are two populations, and will use the name *G. b. beldingi* for the birds in the Cape Region south of La Paz and *G. b. goldmani* for the birds in the central part of the peninsula between about 26° and 27° 20' N.

A friend of mine recently visited San Ignacio Lagoon, on the Pacific coast of Baja at about 26° 45' N, and was mystified by his failure to find the Peninsular Yellowthroat there. After all, the Mexican Check-list (Miller *et al.* 1957) had quoted San Ignacio Lagoon as the type locality for the northern race *G. b. goldmani*. Unfortunately, however, the authors of the check-list erred in transcription: the type locality cited by Oberholser was not the lagoon, but rather the *town* of San Ignacio, which lies well inland (near the exact geographic center of the peninsula) at about 27° 17' N. San Ignacio is surrounded by very arid land, but major springs arise in the arroyo just above the town; water from these springs provides irrigation for crops, fills two large ponds near the town, and flows for several miles down the arroyo below San Ignacio, disappearing underground again before reaching the flat Vizcaino Desert (Nelson 1921). It is the fresh-water marsh and surrounding vegetation in the upper part of this drainage which provides a permanent home for *G. b. goldmani*.

Two of the most widely used Mexican bird guides list salt marshes first among the possible habitats of the Peninsular Yellowthroat. Edwards (1972) says that it occurs "in salt water marshes, or marshy areas or moist grassy or weed-grown fields in river valleys or stream valleys, or other moist areas with dense herbaceous vegetation . . ." In a more terse style, Peterson and Chalif (1973) describe the bird's habitat as "Coastal marshes, riparian growth." Blake (1950) and Davis (1972) give no habitat description for this yellowthroat.

I am uncertain as to the origin of the statement that this yellowthroat inhabits salt marshes; no doubt it does, on occasion. But my perusal of various literature sources (Brewster 1902, Oberholser 1917, Grinnell 1928), personal observations, and discussions with other observers have all suggested that the major stronghold of the Peninsular Yellowthroat is to be found in fresh-water marshes and other dense low growth along streams in the interior of the peninsula. The very fact that Baja is arid, and supports only limited areas of fresh water, may have led to the existence of a small and isolated population of *Geothlypis* in which visible differences could evolve rapidly. It is perhaps also significant that the northernmost population of Peninsular Yellowthroats (to my knowledge) is at San Ignacio; immediately north of this locality lies a particularly dry section of the peninsula, with virtually no permanent fresh water (Nelson 1921). The implication is that the distribution of this form is limited by the availability of fresh-water marsh habitat.

CHARACTERS AND VALIDITY OF THE PROPOSED SUBSPECIES

I first encountered birds of the northern population designated *G. b. goldmani* during a trip to northern and central Baja in March 1977. My companions and I had consulted Grinnell's (1928) work on the birds of the peninsula, so we fully expected to find the yellowthroat in the fresh-water marsh at San Ignacio; we were not disappointed in this. We were, however, confused: because the birds that we saw did not match the "Peninsular Yellowthroat" pictured and described in our field guides (Peterson and Chalif 1973).

The field guide rendition of the male seemed distinctive enough. It was indicated to be a larger bird than the Common Yellowthroat, and more brightly colored. The upperparts were tinged bright golden-green; the underparts were solidly deep yellow, with no white on the belly, and there was a bright yellow line (not white) extending above the black facial mask and crossing the forehead. But at San Ignacio, despite some individual variation, most of the males appeared *intermediate* between the illustrated classic Peninsular Yellowthroat and the familiar Common Yellowthroat from farther north. Nonplussed, we wondered if there might have been a substantial southward invasion of Common Yellowthroats since the time of Grinnell's work, creating an essentially hybrid population at San Ignacio.

On returning to the U.S. and performing some library research, we found some answers — and some more questions.

To our surprise, the "intermediate" males at San Ignacio — which had appeared so different from the bird illustrated in the field guide — fit Oberholser's (*op. cit.*) description of *G. b. goldmani* exactly. Oberholser characterized *goldmani* in part as "Similar to *Geothlypis beldingi beldingi*, but male with the upper surface much duller, more brownish or grayish (less yellowish) throughout; crown behind the black mask largely or wholly grayish or whitish instead of yellow; yellow of underparts somewhat lighter and confined to throat and breast; lower abdomen white or whitish, instead of usually deep yellow . . ." He further pointed out that birds from San Ignacio, at the northern extreme of the range, appeared most extreme in these characteristics, while those specimens from farther south at Comondu (still within the range of the northern population) were slightly more similar to *G. b. beldingi*.

Upon reading this description, we quickly arrived at what seemed a logical interpretation of the case. The population in central Baja was, it appeared, in all respects (except size) intermediate between the population to the south (classic Peninsular) and that to the north (Common Yellowthroat). Oberholser had seemingly glossed over this point, stressing instead how distinctive *goldmani* appeared as compared to nominate *beldingi*. Thus the link which could have led to the early lumping of the Common and Peninsular forms had been obscured long ago. After all, in 1917 — when taxonomic "splitting" was considered much more acceptable than it is today — one could get away with such things.

Our simple picture of the situation was, however, complicated when we read the results of a taxonomic study performed by William H. Behle (1950). Behle did not question the validity of the Peninsular Yellowthroat as a species (in fact, he supported it), but he did question whether *goldmani* was actually a distinct subspecies. Some of the specimens from San Ignacio which he had examined were as brightly yellow-patterned as typical males of *G. b. beldingi* from the Cape Region. Furthermore, he noted that many of the duller specimens were in worn plumage or appeared to be in

molt; he concluded (for reasons that were not made entirely clear) that the "typical" dull appearance of male "*goldmani*" actually represented the first-winter male plumage of the peninsular form. On this basis, Behle recommended that *goldmani* should not be recognized, that all Peninsular Yellowthroats should be regarded as comprising one race, the monotypic *G. beldingi*.

This taxonomic recommendation was not adopted in the subsequent A.O.U. Check-list (1957), nor in the Mexican Check-list, Volume II (Miller *et al.* 1957), both of which listed the two races of Peninsular Yellowthroat without comment. From my own viewpoint, Behle's arguments did not explain why this "immature male plumage" had not been reported earlier from the Cape Region of Baja (which seemingly had received more ornithological attention than the central part of the peninsula), nor why all of the males we saw at San Ignacio fit (more or less closely) the description of *goldmani*. Still, the observer should be forewarned that the existence of two races of Peninsular Yellowthroat has been seriously questioned, and that the regional pattern of variation described here may not hold up under close scrutiny in the field.

A NOTE ON COMMON YELLOWTHROATS IN THE SOUTHWEST

A discussion of the Peninsular Yellowthroat (and of the dull or "intermediate"-appearing individuals of that form) leads logically to a mention of the regional and individual variation in the Common Yellowthroats of the southwestern United States. The breeding race of southeastern Arizona, *G. t. chryseola*, is relatively bright in color; males commonly have the upperparts golden-green, the underparts mostly yellow, and a yellow suffusion in the white stripe over the "mask." A fair amount of individual variation occurs (as in other yellowthroat races), producing some males with the underparts all yellow and with obvious yellow extending up over the mask and across the forehead. Males that look like this also crop up along the lower Colorado River (where the race involved is either *G. t. scirpicola* or *G. t. occidentalis*, depending upon which authority one consults). I have seen some birds in the latter area (quite near the northeastern base of the Baja peninsula) which appeared, aside from their smaller size, very similar to the Peninsular Yellowthroats at San Ignacio.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

In summary, then, from all of the above considerations we might distill the following points of practical advice for the field observer. (1) The most promising habitat in which to seek the Peninsular Yellowthroat may prove to be fresh-water marsh and other low riparian growth along streams in the interior from San Ignacio southward; salt marshes, listed first among possible habitats by at least two popular books on Mexican birds, may be a poor second choice. (2) The most brightly yellow-patterned males, of the sort illustrated in Edwards (1972) and especially in Peterson and Chalif (1973), should be expected mainly in southernmost Baja south of the latitude of La Paz. (3) Any breeding yellowthroats found in that section of the peninsula lying between La Paz and about 26° N would be of particular interest; exact locality, number of birds present, etc., should be carefully recorded. (4) In inland marshes from San Ignacio south to about 26° N, observers can expect to find Peninsular Yellowthroats of a population which has been described as a distinct race, *G. b. goldmani*. It may be typical for males of this population to appear superficially intermediate between those of the Common Yellowthroat and the "classic" bright

yellow-patterned male Peninsular. (5) An individual variant occurring among males of the southwestern races of Common Yellowthroat can be very similar in plumage to some Peninsular Yellowthroats; when these are seen in their normal U.S. range they should not be mistaken for the latter; if individuals of this sort should occur in winter in southern Baja they could be quite difficult to distinguish from the resident form in the field, although their smaller size might be noted. (6) The observer who owns a copy of the Mexican Check-list, Volume II (Miller *et al.* 1957), may wish to write in a correction of the type locality of *G. b. goldmani*; it is the town of San Ignacio, not San Ignacio Lagoon as stated on p. 262 of the check-list. (7) Observers who are highly concerned about the exact taxonomic status of the birds they seek should be prepared to accept an eventual "lumping" of the Peninsular and Common yellowthroats.

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