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Green Violet-ear: First for Canada

by
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As Bird Records Chairman of the Thunder Bay Field Naturalist Club, I occasionally receive reports of birds unexpected in our area, some of which turn out to be false alarms. So when a club member phoned on the evening of 2 July 1991 reporting a Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*) at a local feeder, I was skeptical. Nevertheless, I knew the bird must be something unusual, since it was said to be quite different from the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), the only regular hummingbird in our area.

I went immediately to the location of the sighting, a home on the outskirts of Kakabeka Falls. This is a town on the Trans-Canada Highway about a half-hour drive west of Thunder Bay on the north-west shore of Lake Superior. The area is characterized by rolling hills covered by mixed coniferous and deciduous forest, at the northern edge

of the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Forest Region. There are some clearings occupied by scattered farms and rural homes. The house where the rare hummingbird had been seen had a fairly large open garden, with stands of tall jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) at various distances in all directions, giving the area a decidedly coniferous look, somewhat reminiscent of Mexico's highland pine forests.

The homeowner, Bob Broome, had first seen the bird Sunday, 30 June, at his hummingbird feeder, which was hanging under the eaves of the house, in front of the kitchen window. His sister-in-law, Ellen Stewart, subsequently observed the bird, identified it as a Green Violet-ear using her National Geographic Field Guide, and phoned me.

I met Bob and Ellen on my arrival, and we waited until dark, but all we saw was a Ruby-throated

Hummingbird at the feeder.

The next morning I went back at 0645 h and within 5 minutes the Green Violet-ear appeared. It frequently hovered at the feeder, and between visits would perch in a nearby maple (*Acer* sp.) tree. It chased the Ruby-throat, and also a pair of Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*) that frequented the tree.

It was a large hummingbird, twice the size of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. It was green all over except for bright blue ear patches extending from the bill to behind the eye, which appeared black at some angles. There was also a large round bright blue patch on the lower breast. The undertail coverts were pale gray-brown, and there was a wide blackish subterminal band on the dorsal aspect of the tail, with a narrow pale terminal band. The wings were dull blackish-brown, and extended to the end of the tail when the bird was perched. The bill was at least as long as the head, black, and slightly decurved. The eye was at the top of the blue ear patch and was black. The bird occasionally uttered one or a pair of high-pitched chipping notes.

About 15 people saw the bird on 3 July, and attempts were made to photograph it. The bird fed heavily all day at the feeder, until close to dusk, and was not particularly bothered by the attention, including a photographer's flash. The next morning, 4 July, it was raining heavily, and the Green Violet-ear did not reappear. It was not seen again.

The weather prior to this occurrence was as follows. A high pressure system dominated northwestern Ontario in late June, extending down to Kansas. On the

morning of 26 June, a low pressure system moved in, and by that evening stalled near Geraldton, north of Lake Superior. Strong southwest winds up to 40 km/h coming from at least Oklahoma funneled up to Lake Superior in a wedge formed between the warm front extending from Geraldton toward Sarnia and a cold front extending from Geraldton towards Atikokan. We had 25.4 mm of rain and only 1 hour of sunshine on 26 June, and the next day (27 June) was very hot, with a high of 29.3°C, and strong west-southwest winds. The low pressure system finally moved to the east late in the afternoon of 27 June, and on 28 June another high pressure area descended on northwestern Ontario and dominated the weather for the next few days, with local thunderstorm activity, showers, and cool temperatures.

Unfortunately, the flash photographs could not be developed. The only extant photographs were taken through the kitchen window, and show the bird's silhouette only. These photographs, along with three written reports with sketches, were submitted to the Ontario Bird Records Committee, and were subsequently accepted (Bain 1992).

The Green Violet-ear is a common breeding bird of the highlands of central and southern Mexico, Central America, and South America to Bolivia and Brazil. In Mexico it prefers oak-pine forests and cutovers (Johnsgard 1983). It is to some degree migratory, with females, young and some males from the northernmost Mexican populations moving southward at the beginning of the dry season in October, and

returning to the breeding grounds in July (Johnsgard 1983). Sexes are similar, with the females slightly smaller and duller than the males.

There are several subspecies of the Green Violet-ear. Mexican birds (*C. t. thalassinus*) have the most prominent blue spot on the breast. South American birds (*C. t. cyanotus* and *C. t. crissalis*) lack this patch, and Central American birds (*C. t. cabanidis*) are intermediate. Only *C. t. thalassinus* is migratory.

The Sparkling Violet-ear (*C. coruscans*) looks almost identical to the Mexican Green Violet-ear, but is much bigger (15.5 cm) (Hilty and Brown 1986), with the blue ear patch extending under the chin to the other side. It inhabits the Andes from Colombia to Argentina, and is non-migratory, although it changes elevations seasonally.

The possibility of this being a Sparkling Violet-ear was ruled out by measuring the bird in the photos in comparison to the known dimensions of the feeder. This calculation gives the bird a length of 11 to 12 cm, which compares exactly to the published length of the Green Violet-ear (11.7 cm) (Hilty and Brown 1986). We also entertained the idea that this bird could have escaped from captivity, but a survey of Thunder Bay pet stores and greenhouses failed to turn up any evidence of hummingbirds ever having been kept here. In addition, the prominent blue breast spot ruled out the South American subspecies, which are the ones usually imported into the U.S. (J.V. Remsen, pers. comm.).

This is the first record for Canada; however there are several

for the United States (Table 1). Texas has the most, with 10 accepted records prior to 1991 (Greg W. Lasley, pers. comm.), and two additional 1991 records (Lasley and Sexton 1991). Arkansas has had four records since their first in 1984 (Max Parker, pers. comm.), and North Carolina had one in October 1987 (John Gerwin, pers. comm.). California has had two records, but both were rejected narrowly by the California Bird Records Committee, one because it may have been a South American bird escaped from captivity, and the other due to the brevity of the description and the lack of photographs, which had been obtained, but lost (Roberson 1986).

The Ontario record shares some features with the U.S. occurrences. First, most records have been in the spring and summer between April and August (see Table 1). Second, most have been the Mexican subspecies (*C. t. thalassinus*); and third, the majority have appeared in hilly to mountainous areas (Remsen, pers. comm.).

We suspect that this bird got caught up in a fast-moving weather system while migrating back to its breeding range in the highlands of Mexico. It shot up through the central U.S. to southern Canada, probably arriving in our area on 26 or 27 June, and found a "home-like" atmosphere in Kakabeka Falls. We believe its disappearance from our area was natural, and had nothing to do with the attention paid to it 3 July by birders and photographers.

Table 1: Green Violet-ear Records from North America north of Mexico.

Discovery Date	Location	County	State/Prov.	Reference
Apr. 14 1964	San Benito	Cameron	Texas	Oberholser 1974
Apr. 21 1991	San Benito	Cameron	Texas	Am. Birds 45: 471
May 6 1980	McAllen	Hidalgo	Texas	Am. Birds 34: 795
May 12 1977	Austin	Travis	Texas	Am. Birds 31: 1159
May 14 1983	San Marcos	Hays	Texas	Am. Birds 37: 889
May 21 1976	Wimberley	Hays	Texas	Am. Birds 31: 199
May 21 1991	Helotes	Bexar	Texas	Am. Birds 45: 471
May 26 1981	Lake Jackson	Brazoria	Texas	Am. Birds 35: 841
June 2 1989	Arkadelphia	Clark	Arkansas	Am. Birds 43: 1328
June 3 1989	Brownsville	Cameron	Texas	Am. Birds 43: 1340
June 22 1989	Sinton	San Patricio	Texas	Am. Birds 43: 1278
June 30 1991	Kakabeka Falls	Thunder Bay	Ontario	
July 3 1975	Wimberley	Hays	Texas	Am. Birds 30: 96
July 6 1990	Furton	Newton	Arkansas	Am. Birds 44: 1147
July 11 1961	Santa Ana NWR	Hidalgo	Texas	Oberholser 1974
Aug 4 1990	Rogers	Benton	Arkansas	Am. Birds 45: 116
Aug 18 1977	Berkeley	Alameda	California	W. Birds 17: 73
Aug 25 1969	Austin	Travis	Texas	Oberholser 1974
Aug 31 1977	Mt. Pinos	Kern	California	W. Birds 17: 73
Oct 7 1984	Fort Smith	Crawford	Arkansas	Max Parker
Oct 21 1987	Asheville	Buncombe	N. Carolina	John Gerwin

Note: The two records from California were not accepted by the California Bird Records Committee, but at least one is probably valid (see text).

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