

Winter records of the Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) from Mexico

Since habitat conservation of a species' wintering grounds is essential to its survival, these records provide important new information on this rare warbler.

ALTHOUGH THE WINTER RANGE of the Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) has generally been considered to include southern Mexico (Miller *et al.* 1957; A.O.U. Check-list 1957; Alvarez del Toro 1980), a review of available records by Pulich (1976) clearly indicates that there were no extant specimens or confirmed sight records from points north of Guatemala during the winter months. Accordingly, the sixth edition of the A.O.U. Check-list (1983) gave the species' winter range as "highlands of Guatemala, Honduras and north-central Nicaragua." Because we believe that accurate knowledge of the Golden-cheeked's winter range will aid efforts to preserve the species, we now report two sight records from the state of Chiapas, which will help to establish the winter status of the bird in southern Mexico.

At 10:00 a.m. on January 7, 1978, S. Terrill, B. Jones and M. Hansen observed a male Golden-cheeked Warbler along the entrance road to Lagunas de Montebello National Park, about 50 kilometers southeast of Comitán, Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border. The bird was found with a flock of warblers that included Black-throated Green (*D. virens*), Townsend's (*D. townsendi*) and

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Wilson's (*Wilsonia pusilla*) warblers. The flock was foraging primarily in the midstory (1–5 meters) of pine-oak forest at an approximate elevation of 1500 meters. The bird was studied for 4–5 minutes in very good light from distances as close as 7 meters. The following description is excerpted from Terrill's field notes: "crown black with narrow yellow streak in center forecrown; nape, back, rump and upper tail coverts uniform deep black. Tail black with much white in outer tail feathers. Sides of head deep yellow with a small black pre-ocular spot and post-ocular stripe which decurved terminally. Chin, throat, and breast black. This black extended down onto the sides and flanks as elongated black spots arranged into streaks. Rest of underparts immaculate white. Wings black with whitish edgings

visible on at least some flight feathers. Secondary coverts extensively tipped with white forming two bold white wing bars. Soft parts black."

A second Chiapas sighting occurred on January 15, 1983, when D. Braun found a male Golden-cheeked Warbler foraging with a mixed species flock in dry pine-oak forest at approximately 2300 meters elevation, 6 kilometers west of San Cristobal de las Casas. He showed the bird to M. Braun and 15 other birders from the Venice, Florida, Audubon Society. The bird was studied through binoculars and telescopes for about 15 minutes as it foraged in excellent light at heights of 2–10 meters and distances of 10–30 meters. The bird was a fully plumaged adult male with a black back, cap, throat and breast. It had a strong black eye line on an otherwise yellow face. This combination of field marks served to distinguish the Golden-cheeked Warbler from its close relatives, Black-throated Green, Townsend's and Hermit (*Dendroica occidentalis*) warblers, all of which were seen in the area on the same day. Other species in the same mixed flock included Hermit,

Golden-cheeked Warblers in winter habitat on Quercus conspersa. Painting by Nancy McGowan.



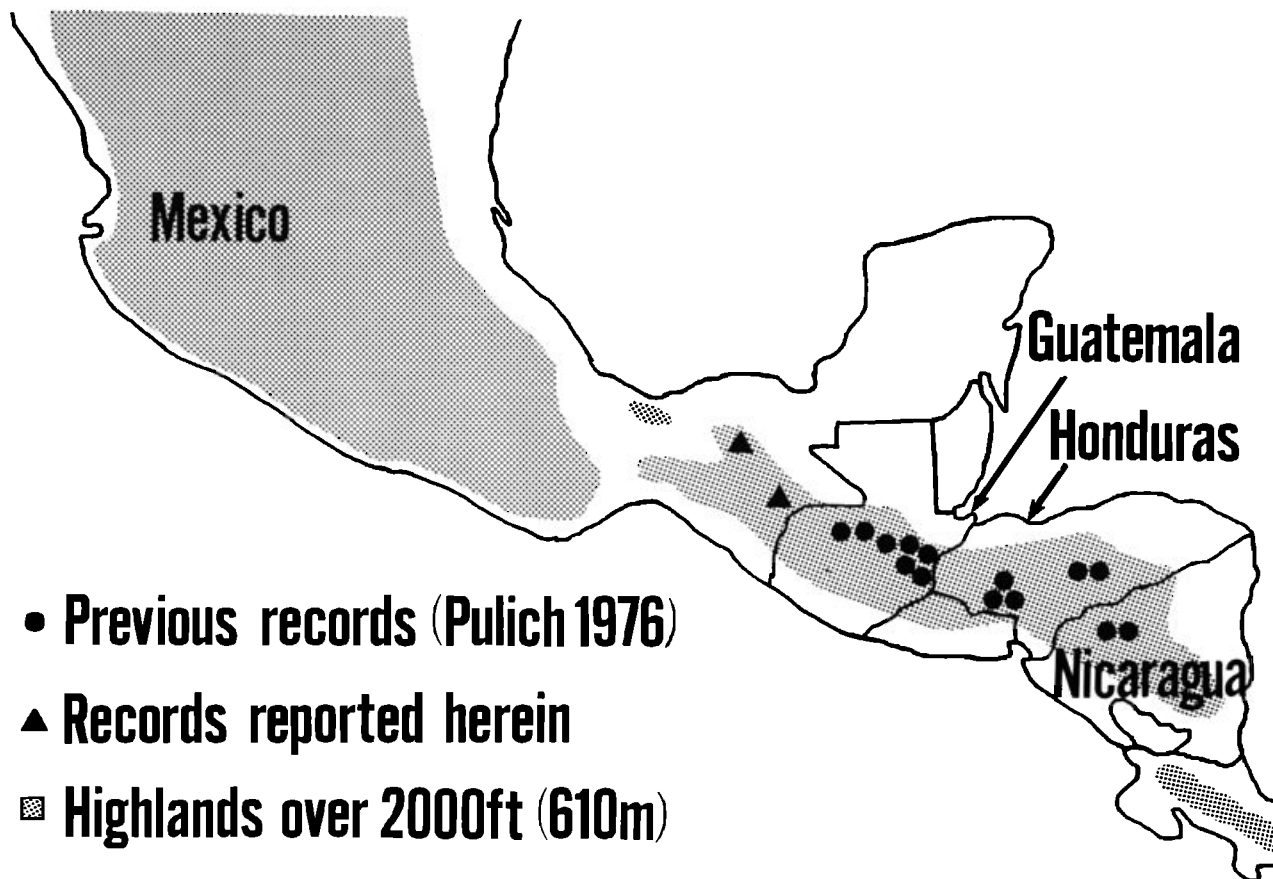


Figure 1. Winter records of the Golden-cheeked Warbler.

Red-faced (*Cardellina rubrifrons*), and Olive (*Peucedramus taeniatus*) warblers and Tufted Flycatcher (*Mitrephanes phaeocercus*).

The authors have seen the Golden-cheeked Warbler on numerous occasions on its Texas breeding grounds. Twenty-two years combined birding experience in Mexico has also familiarized them with the variety of plumages that Hermit, Townsend's and Black-throated Green warblers exhibit during winter. All observers were aware that the sightings were unusual, but that Golden-cheekeds might be possible in the highlands of Chiapas.

Though Pulich (1976) carefully established that there were no confirmable winter records of the Golden-cheeked Warbler in Mexico, it must be noted that the total number of recorded occurrences of the bird anywhere but Texas is still quite small. Lack of records for a relatively rare species in the Neotropics may reveal a paucity of observations rather than delineate the actual distribution of the species. For example, Pulich (1976) cites 6 specimen and 5 sight

records of the Golden-cheeked Warbler from Chiapas. All of these occurred between August 9 and October 11; thus, there are no spring migration records for the state. Yet Pulich did not doubt (nor do we) that the bird occurs in Chiapas in spring.

The two present records demonstrate that the Golden-cheeked Warbler does occur in southern Mexico in winter. How commonly it does so can only be determined once some estimate of observer effort can be compared to the number of observations produced. Since the highlands of Chiapas are continuous with those of Guatemala both physically and zoogeographically (Fig. 1), we suspect that Golden-cheekeds will eventually be found to winter with some regularity in Mexico. This information will be useful to students of bird distribution as well as to those interested in bird preservation. Since habitat conservation on a species' winter range is essential to its survival, an accurate knowledge of the Golden-cheeked's winter distribution will be crucial in efforts to protect this rare and local bird.

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