

Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) on San Clemente Island: First record for California, with review of its occurrence in North America

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Abstract

This paper documents a photographic record of a Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) on San Clemente Island, Los Angeles County, California on 20-21 October 1995, the first record for California and one of only two North American records outside of Alaska.

The California record

On 20 October 1995, while working as a biologist on San Clemente Island, Los Angeles County, California, Robert Patton found an unusual bird in the dry vegetation surrounding a vernal pond at the north end of the island. He photographed the bird (Figures 1, 2) and took brief field notes; however, the bird was at that time identified as a Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*), a potential first for the island. Patton returned to the research laboratory and alerted others to the presence of the bird; he was able to relocate the bird later in the same day and showed it to five other researchers. The bird was seen again on 21 October, but attempts to locate the bird after that date were unsuccessful.

While compiling information for a comprehensive paper documenting birds recorded on San Clemente Island (Sullivan and Kershner 2005), the authors asked Patton to provide documentation for the Vermilion Flycatcher, and he submitted his

photographs for review. Although not ideal images, the photographs showed a bird having features inconsistent with Vermilion Flycatcher, being too warmly colored with peach-buff coloration on the breast, with incorrect shape and posture, and very long tarsi. The photographs were sent to numerous authorities on bird identification, and the consensus was that the bird was a Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*), likely one of the Siberian subspecies (i.e., of the *maura* group; see Urquhart 2002). Patton's field notes indicated that the behavior of the bird was also consistent with the typical foraging style of stonechats rather than with that of Vermilion Flycatcher: hawking for insects from the ground, fanning tail, and flitting wings. The record was reviewed by the California Bird Records Committee and was accepted as the first state record (Cole et al. 2006).

Discussion

Stonechat has a very modest presence as a vagrant in North America. Only one other record has been reported away from Alaska: one photographed on Grand Manan Island, Charlotte County, New Brunswick on 1 October 1983 (*American Birds* 38: 178; Wilson 1986). This individual was identified as being of the Siberian subspecies group *maura*, which is split by some authorities as Siberian Stonechat (*S.*

maura), based on differences in natural history, vocalizations, morphometrics, plumage, and genetics (Urquhart 2002).

There are nine confirmed Alaskan records of the species, but just two are from the autumn. Six records are from 24 May through 6 June at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island: one male 6 June 1978 (Gibson and Kessel 1992); one male 5 June 1985 (Gibson and Kessel 1992, A.B.A. 2002); one female 4-5 June 1992 (A.B.A. 2002); one "immature" 31 May 2003 and one adult male 3 June 2003 (both Tobish 2003); and one 24-26 May 2006 (T. Tobish, pers. comm.). One at Gambell 6 September 2005 (Tobish 2005) is the only fall record from that location. There is also a sight record from 8 September 1992 from Gambell; it has incomplete documentation and is not generally considered verified. There are two Alaska specimens, both of the eastern Siberian subspecies *S. t. stegnegeri* (in the *maura* subspecies group): one found in a Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) nest-burrow at Galena 19 April 1986, the specimen thought to have been preserved since the previous fall (Osborne and Osborne 1987, Gibson and Kessel 1992); and one from Middleton Island on 28 September 1990 (Gibson and Kessel 1992). The late September date of the Middleton Island record suggests that perhaps some fall Stonechats arrive in Alaska after birding coverage has ceased for the season.

The 20-21 October date of the California Stonechat falls roughly within the autumn window for many other Siberian vagrant passerines encountered in California (all from C.B.R.C., in press): one record of Lanceolated Warbler (*Locustella lanceolata*) 11-12 September 1995; nine accepted records of Dusky Warbler (*Phylloscopus fuscatus*) between 27 September and 31 October (bird on the latter date remained through 3 November); three records of Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*) 13 September 1995, 29 September-1 October 1996, and 7 September 2000; one record of Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tar-*



siger cyanurus) 1 November 1989; 11 accepted records of Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) between 15 September and 6 November (the bird on the latter date remained through 10 November), plus one spring record 11 June; 12 records of apparent Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) between 27 August and 21 September; one accepted record of Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) 9-10 October 1988; at least eight records of White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba ocularis*) 9 October–23 December (bird on the latter date remained through 6 March and returned to winter in the next two seasons); at least 12 records of Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla alba lugens*) 7 August–25 January, plus four spring records, 26 April and 10, 13, and 22 May; one record of Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*) 26-29 September 1998; at least 204 accepted records of Red-throated Pipit (*Anthus cervinus*) 9 September–11 November, with strong peak between late September and mid-October; two records of Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*), 21-24 October 1991 and 27-28 September 2002; and four accepted records of Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*), 25 November–8 January. Clearly, there are distinctions among these Asian species: the mostly insectivorous taxa, such as the motacillids, tend to arrive earlier, whereas the granivores, such as emberizids, may arrive later. Such distinctions conform to expectations based on their migration phenology in Asia as well as Alaska. Two other Siberian landbird species have been recorded in California: Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus*), two records from 20-22 October 1984 and 26 November 1986–26 April 1987; and Oriental Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*), two records from 29 October 1988 and 9-23 December 2002.

The mechanism by which such vagrants appear in California is a matter of speculation and debate. During autumn in western Alaska, particularly in the Bering Sea on St. Lawrence Island, such species most often appear with storm systems coming from Asia (Lehman 2003; Brinkley and Lehman 2003); perhaps farther south, such as in California, the pattern of the jet stream also plays a part in displacement of migrants (Sullivan 2004). Some unique combination of weather and migratory confusion combine to produce such records in California, but much is to be



learned. A straightforward connection can be drawn between the arrival of Asian landbirds in Alaska and strong weather systems moving northeastward from Asia toward Alaska, but the connection is less clear in the case of Asian landbirds in California, Oregon, and Washington. In autumn, the easterly air flows and typical storm tracks move from the Sea of Japan, northward toward the latitudes of Aleutians and southern Kamchatka Peninsula, and then back southeastward across the Bering Sea–North Pacific interface and into the Gulf of Alaska. These large-scale base flows apparently generate and/or steer (advection) the weather systems that bring these (probably misoriented) migrants to western Alaska. Farther south, dramatic weather events are less frequent, and the number of Asian landbirds far smaller, making inferences about the possible connections between weather systems and Asian vagrants more difficult. The growing population of astute birders, and improvements in meteorological technology, may permit an understanding of such long-distance landbird vagrants in the future.

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