

## CONFIRMED BREEDING OF THE GREATER YELLOWLEGS IN SOUTHERN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

ANDREW W. PISTON, P. O. Box 1116, Ward Cove, Alaska 99928

STEVEN C. HEINL, P. O. Box 23101, Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

The known breeding range of the Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) extends from Newfoundland, Labrador, and Nova Scotia west to east-central British Columbia and southern Alaska (AOU 1998). In Alaska, this species nests from Etolin and Kupreanof islands in southeast Alaska north and west to Kodiak Island, the Alaska Peninsula, and the western Yukon River valley (Elphick and Tibbitts 1998). The breeding status of this species along the coast of northern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990) and southern southeast Alaska has not been determined (Elphick and Tibbitts 1998), primarily due to a lack of observers. In June 1909, Swarth (1911) reported seeing birds which he thought might be nesting on Duke Island, one of the southernmost islands in southeast Alaska, but he provided few details. Although the Greater Yellowlegs breeds in the central interior of British Columbia, Campbell et al. (1990) mentioned only one possible breeding record from coastal British Columbia, at Porcher Island, which they excluded because of a lack of evidence. Breeding records for Etolin and Kupreanof islands (Willett 1921, Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959), 150 km north of the U.S.–Canada border, are the southernmost ones published for southeast Alaska. Here we extend the confirmed breeding range of the Greater Yellowlegs into southernmost southeast Alaska to 54° 40' N latitude (Figure 1) and lend support to undocumented breeding reports from the adjacent coast of northwestern British Columbia.

On the basis of 16 years of personal observations (1990–2005), we have found the Greater Yellowlegs to be a fairly common migrant and uncommon breeder in southern southeast Alaska. Near the city of Ketchikan, it is the first shorebird to arrive in spring, normally by early April, occasionally by late March (earliest, 21 March 2004, T. and P. Hunt, and 23 March 2002). During the breeding season it has been found near ponds and marshes in open muskeg bogs, habitat favored by this species for nesting (Elphick and Tibbitts 1998). In southern southeast Alaska, muskegs, or *Sphagnum* bogs, commonly fill poorly drained low-lying areas and are covered with sparse, scrubby shore pine (*Pinus contorta*) and shrubs, including stunted yellow cedar (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*), common juniper (*Juniperus communis*), bog-laurel (*Kalmia polifolia*), Labrador tea (*Ledum palustre*), and sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), interspersed with isolated dense stands of pine, yellow cedar, and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) and mountain hemlock (*T. mertensiana*) (Pojar and MacKinnon 1994: 19). Virtually the entire southwest portion of Annette Island and the north-eastern shore of Gravina Island—areas where we have observed yellowlegs annually during the breeding season—are covered by muskegs.

Breeding Greater Yellowlegs begin establishing territories by mid-April. We observed copulating pairs in April at Pennock Island (11 April 1998) and Gravina Island (25 April 2001). Singing and displaying birds were found regularly to early June (e.g., 20, including displaying birds, at Annette Island 6 May 1995 and 13, including displaying birds, over approximately 5 km of muskeg along the northeast shore of Gravina Island 16 June 2002). Greater Yellowlegs were also found during the breeding season at Pennock Island (displaying bird 12 June 1993), Revillagigedo Island (six agitated adults near Manzanita Creek, 19 June 2002, C. Tighe; a defensive adult collected near Harriet Hunt Lake, 2 July 2001, University of Alaska Museum 13578, enlarged testes, J. M. Maley), Prince of Wales Island (two agitated adults at Klawock 25 May 1981; an apparent “nesting” pair at Shipley Bay 9 June 1977; two agitated adults at Control Lake 20 June 1979—all T. E. Kogut), and Kosciusko Island (an apparent

NOTES

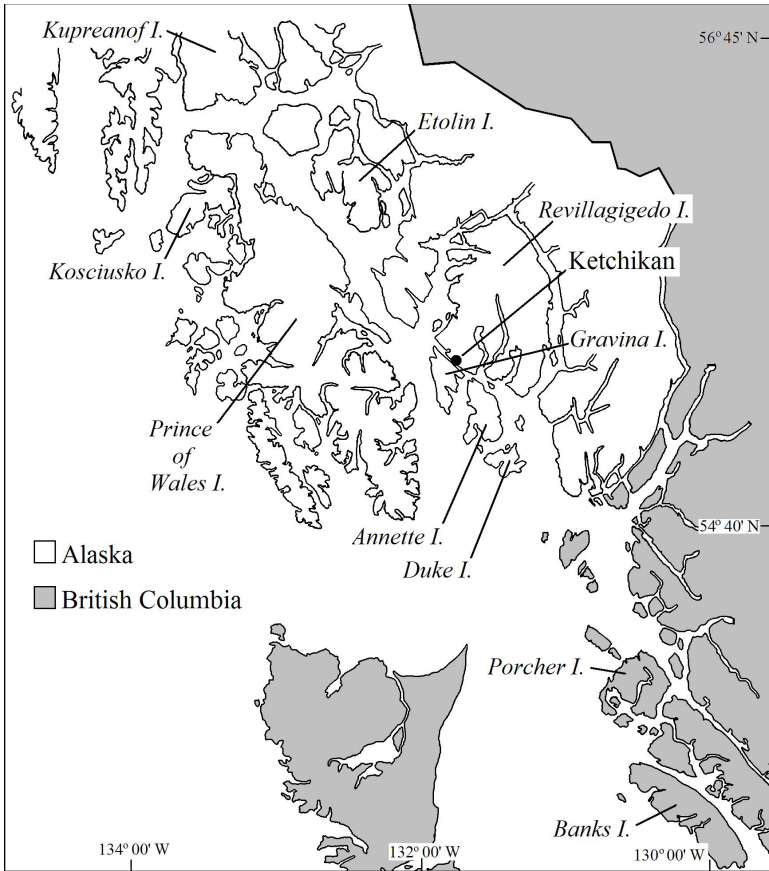


Figure 1. Southern southeast Alaska and the coast of northern British Columbia, showing the city of Ketchikan and islands mentioned in the text.

“nesting” pair 30 May 1978, T. E. Kogut). We frequently observed agitated adults through mid-July, and we encountered aggressive adults on virtually every trip through suitable habitat at Gravina Island to at least 17 July (1991). The adults call loudly and continuously at the sight of a human intruder, often flying in from some distance, diving and flying around the intruder and alighting on the tops of nearby trees and snags. This behavior makes locating nests and downy young extremely difficult, and we have only three confirmed nesting records from our area. Malcolm E. Isleib found a pair attending downy young at Annette Island 4 June 1987. J. C. Preus and M. Gebhard flushed an adult from a nest with two eggs under a small shrub at Gravina Island in early June 1998. Finally, J. E. Piston flushed an adult from a nest with four eggs under a shrubby shore pine at Gravina Island 8 May 2004 (Figure 2). The breeding schedule and nest placement (on the ground under short trees) correspond with other information published from Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959, Elphick and Tibbitts 1998).

## NOTES



Figure 2. Nest of the Greater Yellowlegs at Gravina Island 8 May 2004. The nest was placed on the ground beneath a shrubby shore pine (*Pinus contorta*), at the edge of a muskeg bog.

*Photo by J. E. Piston*

The Greater Yellowlegs is conspicuous during the breeding season in suitable habitat in southern southeast Alaska, and our records suggest that it breeds regularly throughout the region. The small number of nests documented in the region reflects the lack of observer effort and the difficulty of locating the nests, not a lack of breeding

## NOTES

birds. Although Swarth (1911) did not confirm nesting of the Greater Yellowlegs on Duke Island, the proximity of Duke to Annette Island (<1 km) and Duke's extensive breeding habitat lend support to his belief that Greater Yellowlegs were nesting there. Charles de B. Green spent June and July 1921 on Porcher Island, British Columbia, roughly 65 km south of the Alaska–Canada border, where he reported the Greater Yellowlegs to be a fairly common breeder (“young were already hatched...the last week of May”) in the island's extensive muskegs (Brooks 1923). Although Campbell et al. (1990) excluded this report from their account of the species' breeding for British Columbia, they mentioned another report of yellowlegs on territory and, according to the observer, “obviously breeding” at Banks Island and suggested that this report supported C. de B. Green's record. We believe our records from nearby southern southeast Alaska lend further credibility to these reports of breeding Greater Yellowlegs in coastal northwest British Columbia. Until further observations confirm this possibility, however, we can extend the known breeding range of this species only to the southernmost edge of southeast Alaska.

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