

# CURRENT STATUS OF THE BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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In North America, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) breeds in extreme southern Oregon and Idaho; extreme southwestern Wyoming; western Colorado; most of Arizona, Texas and Oklahoma; eastern Kansas; extreme eastern Nebraska; southern Wisconsin and Minnesota; Michigan; extreme southern Ontario; southwestern Quebec; most of the New England states; and all regions to the south including Mexico (Ellison 1992).

The species winters from central California southeast to central Texas, the Gulf States and southern coast to southern Virginia, southward through Mexico to Honduras, western Greater Antilles and Cayman Islands.

Vagrants have been recorded outside the species' normal range, including Washington (seven records, Wahl et. al. 2005); Alberta (three records, Andrew Slater pers. comm.); Manitoba (six records, Manitoba Avian Research Committee, 2003) and British Columbia (three records, Campbell et al. 1997). There are no reliable records for Saskatchewan (Bob Luterbach pers. comm.).

The purpose of this article is to update the status of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in British Columbia.

## ***Change in Status***

Munro and McTaggart-Cowan (1947) do not include the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher among the avifauna of British Columbia. The first record for the province occurred in Victoria in 1963 (Boggs and Boggs 1964). Since then, through 2007, 10 additional records have been reported providing an elevated seasonal status for both the coast and the interior.

## ***Occurrence***

The first occurrence of this species in British Columbia was 10 November 1963, when a single bird was observed foraging with a flock of Bushtits

(*Psaltriparus minimus*) in Uplands Park, Victoria (Boggs and Boggs 1964; Campbell et al. 1997). The bird was again observed the following day.

There have now been a total of 11 occurrences in British Columbia (Table 1). Eight of these involved birds that remained just a day or two. In the other three cases, a bird was observed over a period of at least 12 days.

The first occurrence for the interior was a bird discovered by the author in Nakusp on 14 November 2006. When first discovered it was foraging in a leaf-less maple tree in the company of Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*). When the chickadees would periodically visit a nearby bird feeder, the gnatcatcher remained in the trees. Initially, the bird was observed for about five minutes. Thirty minutes later it was relocated in the same vicinity and photos were obtained (Figure 1). The bird was relocated almost daily until the last observation on 25 November. On 24 November the weather turned considerably colder and by the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> the trees were laden with snow. The gnatcatcher was

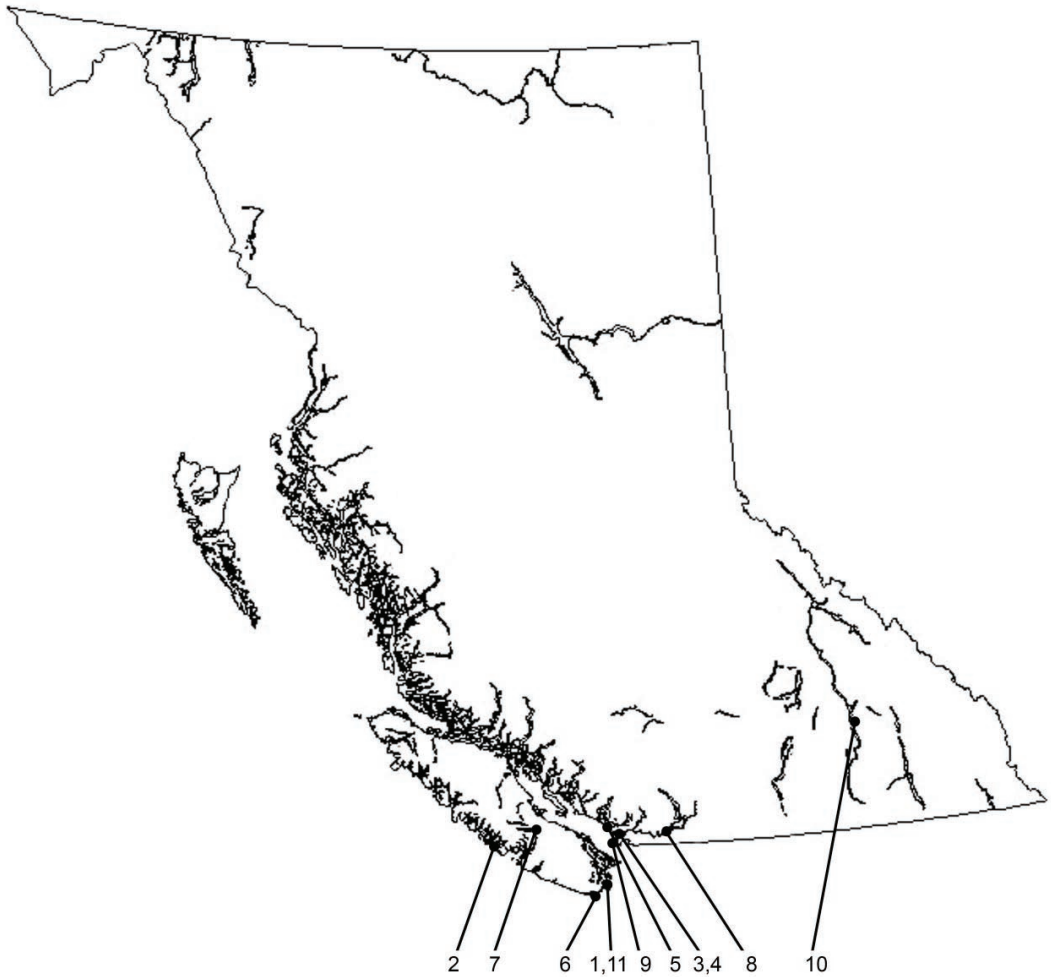
observed foraging in the snow covered trees, but following this date, all attempts to relocate the bird failed.

With the exception of the Nakusp record, all sightings have been on the south coast (Figure 2). Three occurrences have been in summer, six in the autumn period September through November; and two in winter from December through February. One of the autumn birds, however, did linger into the winter period. In adjacent Washington state, five occurrences were reported in autumn and two in winter, a similar pattern to vagrants reported in British Columbia (Wahl et al. 2005).

Although extreme southern Oregon is the northern breeding distribution for the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher on the Pacific coast of North America, Wahl et al. (2005) mention that a male built a nest and defended territory from 25 to 30 May 2002 in Hardy Canyon, Yakima County, in south-central Washington.



**Figure 1.** The first interior occurrence of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher for British Columbia was a single bird photographed at Nakusp on 14 November 2006 (Gary S. Davidson). BC Photo 3529.



**Figure 2.** Locations of confirmed occurrences of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in British Columbia, 1963 through 2007. Numbers correspond to locations in Table 1.



**Figure 3.** Occurrence chronology of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in British Columbia, 1963-2007.

**Table 1.** Chronological order of all documented records for the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in British Columbia. Numbers correspond with those shown in Figure 2.

No.	Record details	No.	Record details
1	Victoria (Uplands Park): A single bird was observed and photographed foraging with a flock of Bushtits ( <i>Psaltriparus minimus</i> ) in a grove of Garry oak ( <i>Quercus garryana</i> ) on 10 and 11 November, 1963. (Boggs and Boggs 1964; Campbell et al. 1997; BC Photo 78).	7	Port Alberni: A single adult male was observed 29 June 2005 by Don Wilshere. No photos or other documentation are available.
2	Chesterman Beach, near Tofino: A single bird was observed 30 December 1979 by Adrian Dorst. (Taylor 1994).	8	Chilliwack: A single bird was reported, and well described, by a back yard birder, on 14 December 2005. No photos or other documentation were provided ( <i>fide</i> Jason Osterhold and Gord Gadsden).
3	Vancouver (Kitsilano Park): A single bird was present from 19 November to 1 December 1981. It was photographed on 19 November (BC Photo 775). This bird was again reported on 20, 22, and 24 December 1981 (Mattocks and Hunn 1982; Campbell et al. 1997).	9	Reifel Island (George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary): A female was observed 4 September 2006. (Vancouver Natural History Society 2007).
4	Vancouver: A single bird was observed 24 October 1984 by Peggy Irving and Muriel Upshall. (Vancouver Natural History Society 2007).	10	Nakusp: A single bird was photographed on 14 November 2006 (see Figure 1). It remained in the area for 12 days until 25 November.
5	Bowen Island (14 km northwest of Vancouver): A male was observed 12 and 13 June 1994 (Bowling 1995; Campbell et al. 1997).	11	Esquimalt Lagoon. A single bird was reported flitting in shrubs and trees at the northwest end of Lagoon Road on 28 October 2007 (see BCVIBIRDS for further updates). No further details were available at the time of publication.
6	Rocky Point, Metchosin: A male was banded and photographed 6 August 2002 (Woodward 2002). It was last seen in the area on 18 August.		

### **Current Status**

Following definitions in Campbell et al. (1990; pages 148-149), the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher can be considered casual in summer, autumn, and winter on the coast. In the interior, the species remains accidental. Annual chronology is summarized in Figure 3. There are no breeding records.

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### *About the Author*

Gary's interest in birds began as a university student in Vancouver. After spending 1973 and 1974 in Fort Nelson, he and his wife Marie moved to Nakusp where they have lived ever since. He has been conducting Breeding Bird Surveys and coordinating Christmas Bird Counts for over 30 years. He is also an active participant in the British Columbia Nest Record Scheme, has served as chair of the British Columbia Field Ornithologists Birds Records Committee for six years, and is presently a Director of the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies.

He has made five trips to Australia, one of which was to work as a birding guide at a birdwatcher's lodge in northern Queensland. He retired in June 2005 from teaching high school mathematics and looks forward to many more years of travelling and birding.