

NOTES

RECORD OF A LESSER GOLDFINCH IN THE SOUTH-CENTRAL INTERIOR OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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RRI Site 1 Comp 4, Kaslo, BC V0G 1M0

The Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*) is the smallest of all North American goldfinches, and is also known as “Dark-back”, “Green-back”, or “Arkansas” Goldfinch. According to Sibley (2000), the back colour varies geographically: first year males are green-backed, adult males in south Texas are black-backed, whereas west of Colorado and New Mexico they are green-backed. Between Colorado and Texas the average amount of black increases to the south and east.

The Lesser Goldfinch ranges from northwest South America through Central America and Mexico, and north to southwest Washington, western Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and northwest Oklahoma (Campbell et al. 2001). It is mainly migratory in the Rocky Mountain region of North America and resident in the remainder of its range (Peterson 1989, Watt and Willoughby 1999).

On 5 and 6 May 2007, an adult male Lesser Goldfinch was observed in Lardeau, a small semi-urban community located at the mouth of Davis Creek on the northwest shore of Kootenay Lake in south-central British Columbia. At mid-day on 5 May, I caught a glimpse of the bird when it landed in our blooming peach tree, which is about 8 m from the house. It then flew to the feeder in the nearby plum tree, fed very briefly, and left.

On 6 May, around 0600 hrs, I observed the bird calling from the top of our birch tree, about 15 m from the house. It had a very bright yellow belly and dark head. About 15-20 minutes later I saw the bird again for 30-45 minutes, feeding alone in the open on the blooming dandelions on a neighbour’s lawn,

and then feeding with some Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*) on the newly sown grass at another neighbour’s property. From time to time, the bird would fly to another feeding spot. My husband, Joe, joined me and observed the bird for several minutes. I was able to get to within 8 m of the bird. My binoculars are Eagle Triumph 8 x 25. The sunrise over Mount Whillet would have been around 0705 or 0710 hrs and the light was very good for observation.

My first impression on 5 May was that this bird should be an American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*), and I took notice because we had not seen any recently. With the sighting in the birch tree, the dark head did not seem “normal”. After finding the bird feeding in the dandelions I thought the plumage was not at all right for an American Goldfinch. The notes I made at the time include: “the bird was smaller than a Chipping Sparrow, the bright yellow belly contrasted with an otherwise smudgy dingy look, the black cap includes the eye, the finch-like bill is grayish, back is dark olive-green (not black) with very, very fine lines where wings come together over rump, the yellow belly extends all the way to the underside of the butt, while feeding I can see a small white patch, not a wing-bar, on the wing, I did not note the tail, not a pretty bird but for the bright belly.”

I was not familiar with Lesser Goldfinch so I consulted Sibley (2000), Peterson (1989) and Terres (1980) to see if there were any possible variations in plumage for an American Goldfinch. I then expanded my search. I did not want it to be a Lesser Goldfinch

because it should not be here and my usual bird consultant, Gail Spitler, was away. Despite the bird's finch-like bill and that it was feeding in the open, I checked for warblers because of the black head, darkish back and distinctive white wing patch while flying. I then eliminated warblers because of the bill, colouring and behaviour. I looked through the field guides for any other possibilities. Nothing else was in the possibility list. The difficulty with these guides was that they showed wing bars for Lesser Goldfinch. The bird's back colour would have been between that of a black back and a green back. Although Lardeau is outside the normal range, this bird appeared to be a Lesser Goldfinch. I called Jim Lawrence and asked him to bring his camera. However, we could not find the bird again.

The weather for 2 to 4 May had been rainy with temperature highs of 6° C to 8° C. The first spring-like day was 5 May, with sun, cloud and a high of 12° C. Our last and very light frost in this area was -1° C the morning of 6 May. Starting with 6 May,

the temperature high was 20° C or more for a week. There were many flowers and shrubs in bloom. In our yard there was a lot of bird-song and birds including several sparrow species and Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*). American Goldfinches were seen in Lardeau on 8 May 2007.

Campbell et al. (2001) list six acceptable records of Lesser Goldfinch for British Columbia based on specimens, identifiable photographs, and detailed field notes. Two of these records are from the interior at Indianpoint Lake near Bowron Lake Park on 9 June 1931 (Dickinson 1953) and Princeton from 11 to 16 May 1999. All other occurrences are from the southern mainland coast.

There are two additional records of Lesser Goldfinch for the province. A male was observed in Creston on 25 October 1992 (Van Damme 2009) and another male was present at Abbotsford between 11 June and 21 August 2008 (Stan Olson pers. comm; Figure 1). Both were observed at bird feeders.



Figure 1. Male Lesser Goldfinch at a feeder in Abbotsford, BC. on 11 and 12 June 2008 (Stan Olson). The more widely distributed “western” form in North America shows on the dorsal side (a) the black cap, dark green back, and black wings and tail, and on the ventral region (b) the yellow underparts, white at the base of the tail, and white in the wings.

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Marlene lives with her husband Joe in the ideal birding spot of Lardeau where they have been practicing retirement and their outdoor pursuits since 1995.