

BULLETIN OF THE OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 31

SEPTEMBER 1998

No. 3

Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 31:21-24, 1998

First record of the Green Violet-Ear for Oklahoma

By BARBARA TARBUTTON AND DICK CLAPP

On 2 September 1996 at approximately 1330 in rural east Norman, Cleveland County, Oklahoma, we observed a large and seemingly black hummingbird land on one of our hummingbird feeders. The light would briefly refract brilliant emerald green in much of its plumage. We noted a small patch of violet in the eye area, a dark blue-green breast, and a slightly curved black bill. The only pale areas on the bird were the tan undertail coverts. The bird appeared to be at least one-third larger than an adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*).

This bird was not aggressive, and it did not associate with the many Ruby-throated Hummingbirds visiting our feeder. It tended to come to the feeders immediately following a flurry of feeding activity by the ruby-



Fig. 1. Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*). Painting by George Miksch Sutton. Reprinted from Sutton (1975) with permission.

throats. It gave a two-note vocalization which was distinctively different from that of the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

We identified this bird as a Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*). Joe Grzybowski, who visited the site and observed the bird on 3 September 1996, concurred with our identification. We then placed our sighting on the Oklahoma Bird Alert. On 4 September, the bird was observed by Jeri McMahon, Mitch and Mary Oliphant, Pat Bergey, Jan Ward, Jim and Marion Norman, Nathan Kuhnert, Debbey Kaspari, Timothy Snively, John Dole, John Sterling, and Bob Funston. On 5 September, S. Woolbright saw the hummingbird between 1330 and 1400, the last time it was seen at our residence. Presumably, the bird left our site that afternoon.

The location of the sightings was 3.5 km south of Highway 9 at 4905 120th Ave. S.E., approximately 3.5 km south of Lake Thunderbird, about 1 km west of the Indian Meridian. This area lies just inside the western edge of the cross timbers of central Oklahoma. The predominate trees are blackjack (*Quercus marilandica*) and post oak (*Quercus stellata*).

The yard containing the hummingbird feeders is a small clearing that has been left to grow wild with primarily native plant species. The predominate grass species were a mix of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), and switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*). The wild flowers that were blooming were partridge pea (*Cassia marilandica*), scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*), mexican hat (*Ratibida columnaris*), and hoary vervain, (*Verbena stricta*); blue sage (*Salvia azurea*) was just starting to bloom. We also had a large stand of domesticated tall garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) and red spider lilies (*Lycoris radiata*) that attracted hummingbirds regularly.

We maintained eight hummingbird feeders from April through October 1996. Four were placed at the edge of the woods approximately 6 m apart, and four feeders hung on the back porch. The Green Violet-ear visited all of these feeders, along with 10–15 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Weather during the days this bird was seen consisted of clear skies, daily high temperatures of 28–32°C, and daily low temperatures of 18–19°C.

The preferred habitat of the Green Violet-ear is oak woods and clearings (Peterson and Chalif 1973). Its normal range is Mexico (from southern San Luis Potosi) to Bolivia, mostly in the highlands. Mlodinow and O'Brien (1996) list 25 "non-rejected" records for the United States from 1961 to 1994; we found an additional 11 records (including ours) for 1994–1996 (National Audubon Society Field Notes, Vols. 48-51). Most are for Texas, all in the southeastern part of the state, but four records were from Arkansas, and one each for North Carolina, Alabama, and Michigan. The records span the dates 14 April (1964; San Benito, Texas) to 4 November (1995; Mobile, Alabama) but are mostly from May to July. The distribution of occurrences and pattern of dates (see Mlodinow and O'Brien

1996) indicate a casual dispersal in recent decades from Mexican populations, at least for most of the records.

The identity of the bird as a violet-ear (*Colibri* sp.) was readily evident from photos taken by Nathan Kuhnert showing the violet ear patch. However, separation from other *Colibri* species or from subspecies other than the Mexican Green Violet-ear (*C. t. thalassinus*) needed evaluation. The Oklahoma Bird Records Committee (OBRC) could not make those assessments independently from the photographs. Thus, the photographs and written documentation were sent to J.V. Remsen, Jr., of Louisiana State University who, with Daniel Lane and Steven Cardiff, provided comments and conclusions (letter of 3 October 1997 to J. Grzybowski).

Of the four *Colibri* violet-ears, only the Sparkling (*C. coruscans*) and Green have primarily emerald-green plumages. However, South American populations of the Green Violet-ear are thought by some to be another species, the Mountain Violet-ear (*C. cyanotis*; Fjeldsa and Krabbe 1990). Sparklings are commonly imported (Remsen pers. comm. to Grzybowski); identification as the Mountain would also strongly suggest an escape from captivity.

Fortunately, the Oklahoma violet-ear could be distinguished from these forms through the combined photographic documentation of Clapp and Kuhnert. The ear patch of the Sparkling extends broadly onto the chin, while it is thin and barely visible in the Green Violet-ear. The green of the throat on some photos appears to meet the bill, excluding the Sparkling. Also, the tan undertail coverts are characteristic of the Green Violet-ear rather than the Sparkling, in which the feathers are green or have narrow whitish edges.

The Green is distinguished from the Mountain form by the bluish-violet breast and upper belly. This was more difficult to discern in the available photographs, but this reflectance was detected by S. Cardiff, J. Arterburn, J. Cox, J. Grzybowski, J. Loyd, and J. Tomer on one of the photos. This is consistent with our observations of the breast being a "dark blue-green." Remsen reserved judgment to indicate that, from the photos, the center of the breast was merely darker.

In composite, these characters confirm that the Oklahoma bird was a Green Violet-ear of the nominate form, *C. t. thalassinus*, and of probable natural vagrancy from Mexican populations. These conclusions were accepted by the OBRC. It is the first record of this species for Oklahoma.

George Miksch Sutton (1975) did a painting of the Green Violet-ear (Fig. 1) in his *Portraits of Mexican Birds*. He stated that "[m]any Mexican species do not range as far northward as the United States . . . one species in this category is . . . the Green Violet-ear." Wouldn't Dr. Sutton have been surprised to hear that one had ranged northward to his own Cleveland County, Oklahoma?

We thank Charles Brown, Joe Grzybowski, and Nathan Kuhnert for their assistance in drafting and reviewing this manuscript and the Uni-

versity of Oklahoma Press for permission to reproduce Fig. 1. Photographs of this bird were deposited with the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee.

LITERATURE CITED

- Fjeldsa, J., and N. Krabbe. 1990. Birds of the High Andes. Zool. Mus., Univ. Copenhagen, and Apollo Books, Svendborg, Denmark.
- Kaufman, K. 1996. Rare bird report. *Birder's World* 6:82.
- Mlodinow, S.G., and M. O'Brien. 1996. America's 100 most wanted birds. Falcon Press, Helena, Montana.
- Peterson, R.T. and E.L. Chalif. 1973. A field guide to Mexican birds. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Sutton, G.M. 1975. Portraits of Mexican Birds. Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman.

RT. 2, BOX 140-T, NOBLE, OK. 73068. Received 1 March 1997, accepted 20 April 1998.

NOTES

Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 31:24–25, 1998

Second record of the Green Violet-ear for Oklahoma.—From 30 May 1998 to 13 July 1998, a Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*) visited hummingbird feeders in our backyard in Lawton, Commanche County, Oklahoma. Many observers who visited the site during that period noted the bird's emerald green dorsum, violet patches just behind and below the eye, long and slightly decurved bill, extensive violet breast patch, glittering green gorget, light green tail with a dark subterminal band, and dusky wings that extended to the tip of the tail. The bird was about 1.5 times the size of the Ruby-throated (*Archilochus colubris*) and Black-chinned (*A. alexandri*) hummingbirds that also visited these feeders. The Green Violet-ear was aggressive, often chasing Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Black-chinned Hummingbirds from the feeders. It fed only at feeders in the shade and would not visit ones I moved into direct sunlight. The Lawton bird appeared to represent the nominate race, *C. t. thalassinus*, judging from the prominent violet breast patch. Photographs of this bird by J. Grzybowski were submitted to the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee.

This is the second record of the Green Violet-ear for Oklahoma, the first being a bird reported 2–5 September 1996 in Norman, Cleveland County (Tarbutton, B., and D. Clapp, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 31:21–24, 1998). The Norman bird also appeared to represent *C. t. thalassinus*. Another extralimital Green Violet-ear was reported a week after the Lawton bird was last seen, on 20 July 1998, at Center Point, Kerr County,