
**SECOND CONFIRMED OCCURRENCE OF A RED-HEADED WOODPECKER
MELANERPES ERYTHROCEPHALUS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA**

Renee J. Franken and Cameron S. Gillies
Tierra Consulting
Box 245, Windermere, B.C. V0B 2L0

Abstract -- A Red-headed Woodpecker observed on 22 June 1998 in the East Kootenay region of British Columbia is the second documented occurrence in the province. This raises the status of Red-headed Woodpecker in British Columbia from accidental to casual.

Key words: British Columbia, East Kootenay, extralimital occurrence, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*, Red-headed Woodpecker.

The Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) breeds exclusively in North America. In Canada, it breeds in southern Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, southern Ontario and southwestern Quebec and formerly bred in southern New Brunswick (Godfrey 1986; Page 1996). It also breeds southward to central Texas, the Gulf coast and Florida, extending west into Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico (American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Smith *et al.* 2000). In Canada, the Red-headed Woodpecker occasionally wanders eastward to Nova Scotia, westward to Alberta and very rarely into British Columbia (Godfrey 1986; Page 1996).

On 22 June 1998 we observed an adult Red-headed Woodpecker near Fairmont Hot Springs in the East Kootenay (50° 21' 35" North, 115° 54' 35" West). The bird was observed for more than three hours and photographs were taken (Figure 1). During this time we observed the bright red head, neck and breast, black upper back and large white patches of the wings and upper rump that characterize adult Red-headed Woodpeckers (Bent 1939). It could not be located on the following day. John M. Cooper confirmed identification from these photographs.

The bird was foraging in an area locally known as the Dutch Creek Burn at the southwestern end of Windermere Lake. This area was burned in 1971 by an intense forest fire and is now primarily grassland habitat with some Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) regeneration and standing snags of Douglas-fir. This is consistent with a well-documented preference by Red-headed Woodpeckers for open wooded areas, such as burned or logged-over forests or open areas with large scattered trees (Bock *et al.* 1971; Conner 1976; Smith *et al.* 2000) with snags considered an important component of their nesting habitat (Sedgwick and Knopf 1990; Smith *et al.* 2000). The Red-headed Woodpecker at Fairmont Hot Springs was seen perching on, and flycatching from, snags. Although Red-headed Woodpeckers are omnivorous, consuming insects, spiders, worms, berries, seeds, nuts and even eggs, nestlings, lizards and mice (Short 1982; Ehrlich *et al.* 1988; Smith *et al.* 2000), they forage primarily by fly-catching, therefore frequenting open habitat (Bent 1939; Godfrey 1986; Smith *et al.* 2000). There was no indication of breeding

occurring, although this area resembles breeding habitat described elsewhere (Bock *et al.* 1971; Conner 1976; Godfrey 1986; Sedgwick and Knopf 1990; Smith *et al.* 2000).

In British Columbia, the Red-headed Woodpecker is considered to be of accidental occurrence (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). Previous reports of Red-headed Woodpeckers in British Columbia include a record of a pair at Pass Creek, near Robson on 25 June 1890 (Macoun and Macoun 1909), a photo record of an adult from 11 to 13 July 1965 near Lavington east of Vernon (Rogers 1965; Grant 1966; Godfrey 1986; Campbell *et al.* 1990b) and a sight record near Skookumchuk in the East Kootenay area on 18 June 1989 (Kinley 1989). However, only the Vernon record was verified (Campbell *et al.* 1990b).

The Red-headed Woodpecker is more common in eastern North America but ranges into western North America. It is considered uncommon in Manitoba (Taylor 2003) and rare in Saskatchewan (Smith 1996), and is declining in both provinces (Smith 1996; Taylor 2003). In Alberta, the Red-headed Woodpecker is considered to be a casual wanderer, not known to breed (Semenchuk 1992). Records in the mountains and foothills adjacent to British Columbia include one at Gorge Creek west of Turner Valley, Alberta on 13 June 1961 (Salt and Wilk 1966; Sadler and Myres 1976; Wiseley 1979), one at Waterton, Alberta on 14 May 1966 (Sadler and Myres 1976), one at Kananaskis, Alberta near Seebe on 27 June 1969 (Merilees 1969; Sadler and Myres 1976), one in Kananaskis Provincial Park, Alberta (now Peter Lougheed Provincial Park) on 24 June 1976 (Salt 1976; Wiseley 1979; Pinel *et al.* 1991) and one near Hinton, Alberta on 10 June 1997 (Schaffer 1997). Red-headed Woodpeckers also occur regularly in eastern Montana (Montana Bird Distribution Committee 1996). In Idaho, the Red-headed Woodpecker is considered casual or accidental (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). It is not known to have occurred in Washington state (Washington Bird Records Committee 1997).

The Red-headed Woodpecker is considered to be the eastern ecological counterpart of the western Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), both in habitat selection



Figure 1. Two views of Red-headed Woodpecker observed near Fairmont, B.C. in 1998.

and feeding habits (Bock *et al.* 1971; Cannings *et al.* 1987). In the Dutch Creek Burn, seven pairs of breeding Lewis's Woodpeckers were found during 1998 (Cooper and Beauchesne 2000). The Lewis's Woodpecker is an uncommon woodpecker of the dry southern interior of British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). It, too, is a flycatching woodpecker that prefers nesting in open habitat, such as burns (Cannings *et al.* 1987; Campbell *et al.* 1990b). Similar to the Red-headed Woodpecker, the Lewis's Woodpecker is also thought to be declining in much of its range because of loss of suitable habitat (Cooper *et al.* 1997). No interaction was observed between these species.

The Red-headed Woodpecker is considered "Vulnerable" in Canada by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) because of population declines throughout most of its range (Page 1996). Habitat loss, through the removal of dead trees, is thought to be the primary cause of its decline (Page 1996) but competition for nest cavities with European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) is also thought to be a significant factor (Kilham 1983; Pitcher 1991; Ingold 1994). Our sighting of a Red-headed Woodpecker in British Columbia and recent sightings in western Alberta occurred despite declines in numbers over much of its range. Although the Red-headed Woodpecker has strayed into parts of southern British Columbia and western Alberta in the past, the decline in overall numbers makes these extralimital sightings even more unusual and interesting. The status of Red-headed Woodpeckers in British Columbia can now be raised from "accidental" (only one record) to "casual" (two to six records) as defined by Campbell *et al.* (1990a:148).

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