

FIRST RECORD OF THE SEDGE WREN IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Abstract—A Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) observed on 29 October 2005 at the University of British Columbia is the first documented occurrence in the province. The status of Sedge Wren in British Columbia should therefore be listed as accidental.

Key words: British Columbia, Vancouver, extralimital occurrence, *Cistothorus platensis*, Sedge Wren

On 29 October 2005 at approximately 11:15, Pacific Daylight Time, north of the Museum of Anthropology at The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, I was birding a brushy strip along the Point Grey cliff face, when my attention was drawn to a series of “chep” notes which did not seem to belong to any of the usual bird species of the area. The unidentified bird was found moving near the ground in a thicket of Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus discolor*) and Scotch Broom (*Cystis scoparius*). Catching brief glimpses of the bird, I saw that it was a wren, with streaking on its back and crown, and concluded that it was likely a Sedge Wren. This impression was strengthened by consulting Sibley’s Guide (Sibley 2000), and confirmed by two other experienced birders, Mike and Rick Toochnin, who arrived, saw and heard the bird. They noted that this was a first record for BC.

The Vancouver Rare Bird alert telephone line was notified, photographs were taken (Figures 1 and 2), and additional birders arrived who helped keep track of the bird until sundown (ca. 17:00). Approximately 18 individuals observed the bird on this day. The bird was seen and heard briefly the next morning, 30 October, by Brian Self¹ of Vancouver, but subsequent efforts to relocate it over the following week were unsuccessful.

I managed to get photographs of the bird showing the main field marks (Figure 1), and Walter Ammann of Vancouver obtained excellent additional pictures later in the day (Figure 2). The bird was approximately the size of a Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*). The upper tail was brown, barred, slightly longer than that of Winter Wren, and was often held cocked upwards. The bill was sharply pointed, slightly downcurved, the lower mandible yellowish, grading to dusky near the tip. The back was striped black and white, finer and not as boldly as on a Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*). The head was finely striped blackish against the brown, with a light-buff

supercilium. The throat and upper breast were whitish, grading to buff on the belly; the sides were rich buff. The wings were brown and extensively barred.



Figure 1. Sedge Wren at University of British Columbia, October 29, 2005. Photo by E. Peter M. Candido.



Figure 2. The Sedge Wren at University of British Columbia on October 29, 2005. Photo by Walter Ammann.

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The bird vocalized with single, sometimes double but well spaced calls, similar in duration to those of Winter Wren, but thinner, higher pitched and weaker. On recordings such as Thayer's Birds of North America (Thayer 1998), and the Stokes Field Guide to North American Bird Songs (Elliott *et al.* 1997), this call was similar to notes which usually precede the Sedge Wren's song. The bird tended to fall silent for periods of 10-30 min. or so, then would call a few times, perhaps in response to some disturbance. This allowed the bird to be relocated repeatedly, since it was usually hidden from view. The bird foraged on or near the ground in patches of dry grass or in the adjacent broom/blackberry thicket. It was usually obscured by vegetation, venturing into the open only occasionally, for a few seconds at a time. If flushed, the bird flew only a short distance before plunging again into cover. The bird sometimes responded to occasional "pishing" by calling a few times, and coming briefly into view.

In North America, the Sedge Wren breeds in southern Canada east of the Rockies (east-central Alberta, central and southeastern Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, southern Ontario and extreme southern Quebec), south to the Dakotas, eastern Nebraska and eastern Kansas, and east to Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, extreme northwestern Pennsylvania and northern New York (Herkert *et al.* 2001). Scattered and very local breeding outside the principal range occurs east and south through most eastern

U.S. states, south to northern West Virginia and eastern Delaware (shores of Chesapeake Bay). This population is highly migratory, with little or no overlap between breeding and wintering ranges (Kroodsma and Brewer 2005). The species winters from Chesapeake Bay south to southern Florida and west along the Gulf of Mexico to southern Texas. In Mexico, its winter range includes all or parts of the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Tamaulipas and Veracruz (Herkert *et al.* 2001). The geographic distribution of Sedge Wren extends into Central and South America, south to Cape Horn and the Falkland Is. These populations appear to be sedentary, and wide differences in vocalizations suggest that they may represent up to three different species (Kroodsma and Brewer 2005).

Sedge Wren does not appear on checklists of British Columbia birds, and is not mentioned in the comprehensive work of Campbell *et al.* (1990-2001). In fact, few records of this species are known for the Pacific region of North America. No accepted records exist for the state of Washington, and only one for Oregon (Oregon Rare Birds Committee, 2005). The latter involved a bird present on the North Spit of Coos Bay, Coos Co., from 30 May to 12 June 2003, and exhibiting territorial behaviour. For California, there are 7 accepted records dating from 1980 to 2003, and one additional record from 2005 (Table 1). With the exception of one early summer record, these are all fall or winter sightings.

Table 1. Records of Sedge Wren in California.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Reference</u>
i) Accepted by the California Bird Records Committee:		
4-8 Nov. 1980	Bolinas Lagoon, Marin County	Luther <i>et al.</i> 1983
8 June - 4 July 1986	Lake Shasta Valley, Siskiyou County	Bevier 1990
23-24 Oct. 1986	Ft Funston, San Francisco	Langham 1991
15-17 Oct. 1991	Huntington Beach, Orange County	Patten <i>et al.</i> 1995
26-27 Oct. 1997	Pt. Mugu, Ventura County	Rottenborn and Morlan 2000
12 Nov. 1999	Saline Valley, Inyo County	McKee and Erickson 2002
7 Dec. 2002 - 15 Mar. 2003	Half Moon Bay, San Mateo County	Cole and McCaskie 2004
ii) Additional Records:		
9-26 Jan. 2005	S. San Francisco, San Mateo County Photographs at: http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/sewr011605.htm	Mast, 2005

The migratory populations of Sedge Wren in North America show little site fidelity between breeding seasons, and high mobility even within a given breeding season (Burns 1982). Interestingly, Bedell noted an unusual pattern of late arrival and nesting dates in the southern part

of their range, in central Nebraska (Bedell 1996). In the areas studied, a majority of singing males and active nests were found in August, while few birds were detected in June. It was suggested that these males may have moved into the area in late summer, perhaps having already bred

elsewhere. In northern Illinois, the Sedge Wren population increases markedly in late July - early August, coincident with the decrease in numbers in northern breeding areas such as northern Wisconsin (Herkert *et al.* 2001). These behavioural patterns may have evolved in response to the relatively transient nature of most Sedge Wren habitat, consisting of tall sedges and grasses in ephemeral wet meadows, upland margins of ponds and marshes, coastal marshes, sphagnum bogs, etc. (Herkert *et al.* 2001). The species tends to avoid areas of standing water and wetlands dominated by cattails (Herkert *et al.* 2001).

Given the apparent mobility of North American Sedge Wren populations, the paucity of records of this species west of the Rockies is striking. The Sedge Wren is a nocturnal migrant (Herkert *et al.* 2001), and winters south and east of its breeding range. Unfortunately, quantitative studies of winter habitat use and bird densities are lacking (Herkert *et al.* 2001). On the basis of Christmas Bird Count Data, Sedge Wren winter habitat lies mainly east of the 100th meridian, and is restricted largely to warmer areas below 152 m above sea level; the most concentrated populations are in regions warmer than 4°C in January, this being the Gulf coast of Texas and Louisiana (Root 1988).

The small size and secretive habits of the Sedge Wren are undoubtedly factors in the scarcity of sightings of this species in British Columbia and the west coast states of North America. However, the small number of sightings over a 25-year period in California, a region which is quite intensively covered by experienced observers, suggests that such occurrences are indeed relatively rare.

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