

Green-tailed Towhee Sight Record
from Hancock County, Mississippi

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On 20 October 1983, we observed an adult-plumaged Green-tailed Towhee (Pipilo chlorurus) at Pearlinton, Hancock Co., Mississippi. The towhee was seen in an area of brush, beside a gravel road; the habitat was fairly open and consisted of mixed woods, young pines, and brush. It was adjacent to thick woods.

The roadside from which the towhee was seen borders the south fence of the Mississippi Welcome Center at Interstate 10 and Mississippi highway 607, and is part of the buffer zone of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration complex.

Noting movement in the brush, we stopped our car and began making "psshing" sounds. Immediately the towhee flew up to the top wire of the fence behind the Welcome Center. We had an unobstructed view from about 3 m. The most obvious characteristic of the bird was a bright rufous crown which was erected in the manner of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula) when agitated. Identification was made immediately on the strength of the raised orange crown feathers, olive green back, white throat, and pale gray undersides.

The Green-tailed Towhee remained on the fence for several seconds, all the time keeping its crown feathers erect. It appeared to have responded to our psshing sounds and behaved in an agitated manner, frequently changing position and jerking its tail, but at all times facing us.

It then flew across the gravel road and into heavy brush, where it was well concealed. At that point we played a tape of a Screech Owl (Otus asio) call and the towhee reacted by frequent changes of position within the brush. It then flew to the lower branch of a small pine, which was directly behind the brush, and remained there for about 30 seconds before it flew into an area of more mature woods about 50 m away.

It seemed to us that the towhee definitely responded, both to the pssing sounds and to the Screech Owl call. Accounts of the behavior of the Green-tailed Towhee in its normal range stress this species' shyness, and cite many instances when it has been known to skulk away under heavy brush rather than fly in the presence of an "intruder."

Two Green-tailed Towhees, which were seen by John Izral and Stephen Peterson during the Jackson County Christmas Bird Count on 18 December 1976, behaved in such a manner. However, behavior such as we observed on 20 October was judged to be in keeping with that species' behavior in at least some instances by Joseph McGee, who is familiar with the species (pers. comm.).

This sight record and the Izral-Peterson record cited above are the only records of the Green-tailed Towhee from Mississippi. However, it has occurred in many eastern states, including Alabama and Louisiana, and most such records are from early October through mid-April (Lowery 1974, Imhof 1976).

Literature Cited

- Imhof, T.A. Alabama birds, 2nd ed. University of Alabama Press, University.
- Lowery, G.H., Jr. 1974. Louisiana birds, 3rd ed. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge.