



Some records of birds from Belize, Central America, including three first records

by R. Walters

Received 29 June 1992

Russell's (1964) monograph has for many years been the standard work on the avifauna of Belize, formally British Honduras. Further information is contained in Barlow *et al.* (1969, 1970, 1972), Erickson (1977), Kiff & Kiff (1974) and Wood & Leberman (1987). An annotated checklist (Scott Wood *et al.* 1986) gives brief distributional and abundance details of all species known to have occurred in Belize up to the end of 1985.

Whilst researching the history of banding in Belize, I also found several significant records, which pre-date the checklist. I found a later occurrence of one species, which I repeat here as the publication in which it is recorded has a limited distribution. Except where stated, all instances of banding were carried out by W. P. Nickell. Nickell was an experienced bander, with considerable experience in the northern Neotropics. He took part in six expeditions to Belize between 1960 and 1965 (Nickell 1968).

To eliminate the possibility of input error, all computer records were verified against the original banding schedules. Sequence and nomenclature follow A. O. U. (1983).

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL *Glaucidium gnoma*

This species is not listed by Russell (1964) or Scott Wood *et al.* (1986). A single individual of this species was banded at San Antonio, Cayo District, on 24 February 1960. On 8 March 1986, a Royal Air Force

Ornithological Society expedition netted and banded another near Guacamallo Bridge, approximately 24 km south of San Antonio (Counsell 1988). In Guatemala this owl is recorded as an uncommon resident of pine and oak woodland in the highlands, ranging down into the sub-tropics (Land 1970). In Honduras it is reported as an uncommon resident of highland pine and cloud forest (Monroe 1968). The areas where both individuals were trapped in Belize fall within the Mountain Pine Ridge, an area of highland pine forest. In view of the Guatemala and Honduras records, the occurrence of this species in Belize as a rare resident should not be unexpected.

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE *Contopus sordidulus*

Scott Wood *et al.* (1986) list this species as accidental, with one previous record (Russell 1964: 122; a specimen collected at Orange walk in December 1881). An individual of this species was banded at Stann Creek on 15 March 1960.

CASSIN'S KINGBIRD *Tyrannus vociferans*

Two banded at Stann Creek on 9 March 1960, one banded at Melinda Forestry Station on 6 March 1961, one banded on 9 March 1962 at Silver City, Stann Creek District. I can find no trace of this last locality. In addition to the above, I banded a single Cassin's Kingbird near Ladyville, Belize District, on 9 April 1985. Scott Wood *et al.* (1986) list this species as an accidental, with one record. The only published record prior to 1986 is one on the Christmas Bird Count for Belize City area, on 26 December 1985 (*American Birds* 40 (1986): 1024).

WESTERN KINGBIRD *Tyrannus verticalis*

One banded 11 miles west of Stann Creek on 16 April 1963. This species has not been previously reported from Belize. Monroe (1968) states that the Western Kingbird is a rare transient in the Caribbean lowlands of Honduras, and that there are sight records from the Swan Islands.

GREY KINGBIRD *Tyrannus dominicensis*

One banded El Cayo (San Ignacio) on 22 March 1960, another at Middlesex on 26 March 1963. Monroe (1968) lists it as a rare migrant to the Swan Islands, and probably the northern coast of Honduras. The only previous published records for Belize are by Howell *et al.* (1992).

HUTTON'S VIREO *Vireo huttoni*

Wood *et al.* (1986) list this species as a rare (less than five records) permanent resident of the Mountain Pine Ridge. Russell (1964) mentions only one record, a specimen from the Mountain Pine Ridge taken on 26 April 1888. Nickell banded two individuals of this species, one on 22 March 1963 and another on 19 March 1964. On these dates he was working in the Stann Creek Valley, between the coast at Dangriga and Middlesex. These records extend the geographical distribution of this species into the Southern Hardwood Forest.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Danny Bystrak of the Bird Banding Laboratory, United States Department of the Interior, for verifying the computer records against the originals.

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Address: R. Walters, Morskade 18, 2332 GB Leiden, Netherlands.

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A critique of Walters' (1993) new bird records from Belize

by Steve N. G. Howell

Received 23 August 1994

Walters (1993) reported records of six species of birds from Belize (formerly British Honduras), Central America, based primarily on birds banded between 1960 and 1964 by W. P. Nickell. Although five of these species would represent first records for the country, a review of the records in a wider context casts doubt upon their authenticity. It should be remembered, however, that during the early 1960s little or no

literature was available to correctly identify Central American birds in the field, or to evaluate the significance of such records.

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL *Glaucidium gnoma*

Walters (1993) reported two records of birds banded in the vicinity of Mountain Pine Ridge, which he claimed to be an area of "highland pine forest". He considered the records "not unexpected" since *G. gnoma* occurs in the highlands of Guatemala and Honduras.

Elevations in Mountain Pine Ridge "range from 1000 to 3000 feet" (i.e. 300–900 m) (Russell 1964) and, despite the dominance of pines (*Pinus caribaea*, a species common at sea level in northern Central America), the avifauna is distinctly tropical, or at best marginally subtropical. Also, the two localities noted by Walters (1993), San Antonio and Guacamallo Bridge, are at lower elevations around the periphery of Mountain Pine Ridge proper, where pines meet humid evergreen forest. Species common at these sites include many widespread tropical lowland species such as White Hawk *Leucopternis albicollis*, Scaled Pigeon *Columba speciosa*, and Barred Antshrike *Thamnophilus doliatus* (pers. obs.). Further, the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *G. brasilianum* is common around San Antonio, as it is throughout the pines of Mountain Pine Ridge (pers. obs.), and the Central American Pygmy-Owl *G. griseiceps* (Howell & Robbins 1995), a representative of the Least Pygmy-Owl complex, would also be expected at Guacamallo Bridge. The only Belize record for Least Pygmy-Owl noted by Russell (1964) was from "Southern [= Mountain] Pine Ridge". (This species is characteristic of lowland rain forest (Howell & Robbins 1995) and is not common in Mountain Pine Ridge, as stated erroneously by Wood *et al.* (1986).)

Although in Guatemala *G. gnoma* has been reported from 400–2600 m (Land 1970), this lower elevational limit is almost certainly in error, probably based upon Griscom (1931, 1932) who confused distinctions between the Northern and Least (*G. minutissimum*) pygmy-owl groups and mistakenly lumped the two. Records of *G. gnoma* from Honduras are from 1700–2000 m (Monroe 1968) and the species' elevational range in southern Mexico is 2000–3000 m (Binford 1989, pers. obs.) which probably reflects its true distribution in Guatemala. Throughout its range, *G. gnoma* is a bird of temperate habitats. Thus I question the identification of birds banded in Belize as *G. gnoma*, a highland species otherwise unknown from that country, and which would, *contra* Walters (1993), be highly unexpected in tropical pine woods.

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE *Contopus sordidulus*

The only prior report of this species from Belize is for December 1881 (Russell 1964, Wood *et al.* 1986). Since Western Pewees migrate primarily through the highlands of Mexico and Central America, and winter in South America (A.O.U. 1983, Howell & Webb 1995), this record is highly questionable, being out of range and out of season (e.g. the latest autumn date for Honduras is 11 October; Monroe 1968). Further, separation, even in the hand, of the sibling Western Pewee

and Eastern Pewee (*C. virens*; a common passage migrant in Belize from early March to mid May) can be extremely difficult, and is not always possible (Pyle *et al.* 1986).

The record reported by Walters (1993), and indeed this species' place on the Belize list, is best considered hypothetical.

CASSIN'S KINGBIRD *Tyrannus vociferans*

This species winters south in the interior and on the Pacific Slope of Middle America to northwestern Guatemala, rarely to Honduras (A.O.U. 1983, Howell & Webb 1995); it is rarely recorded as a vagrant in well-watched areas of eastern North America (A.O.U. 1983). The basis for the Belize record listed by Wood *et al.* (1986) is unclear (D. S. Wood *in litt.*) and consequently the reports of Walters (1993) would constitute the first records for Belize.

Although the occurrence of Cassin's Kingbird in Belize is possible, I suggest that the species' place on the Belize list, including the five undocumented records listed by Walters (1993), be considered hypothetical, since no other observers have reported this species from Belize; Cassin's Kingbird is known from one record in Honduras (whence, presumably, spring migrants to Belize would originate); and field identification of kingbirds has been treated inadequately in bird guides for Mexico and Central America.

WESTERN KINGBIRD *Tyrannus verticalis*

While this species, which winters on the Pacific slope and in the interior of Middle America south to Costa Rica, could occur as a vagrant to Belize, its presence on the Belize list should be confirmed by more than an undocumented banding report from an observer responsible for other questionable records.

GREY KINGBIRD *Tyrannus dominicanus*

The two records reported by Walters (1993) fit into the pattern of two well-documented recent records (Howell *et al.* 1992), with all four occurring from 17 March to 3 April, and thus may have been identified correctly.

HUTTON'S VIREO *Vireo huttoni*

Hutton's Vireo has been attributed traditionally as occurring in Mountain Pine Ridge, Belize, based on an 1888 specimen (Russell 1964, Wood *et al.* 1986). However, Phillips (1992) examined this anomalous specimen and found that it is a Solitary Vireo *V. solitarius*, a small race of which has long been known as a resident in Mountain Pine Ridge. Thus there is no evidence for the presence of Hutton's Vireo in Belize, and its occurrence there is at best highly unlikely on biogeographic grounds.

Walters' (1993) reports of Hutton's Vireo from the southern hardwood forests of Belize, a habitat unknown for the species, are thus not credible. Perhaps, like the old specimen, they may refer to the Solitary Vireo, an apparently resident population of which was

reported recently from the hardwood forests of southern Belize (Parker *et al.* 1993).

The questions surrounding the above records highlight the danger of relying on undocumented banding records from poorly known tropical localities and show that, even though a bird has been examined in the hand, it may not have been identified correctly. It also may be noted that the only two reports of Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata* from Belize, correctly considered hypothetical by Russell (1964), are birds captured for banding by Nickell in 1961.

Thus the reports of *Glaucidium gnoma* and *Vireo huttoni* reported by Walters (1993) surely refer to misidentified birds, while the reports of *Tyrannus vociferans*, *T. verticalis* and *Contopus sordidulus* are at best considered hypothetical. I thank Stephen M. Russell for reviewing a copy of this note.

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Address: Point Reyes Bird Observatory, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, California 94970, U.S.A.