

BIRDS OF THE COAST OF CENTRAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

By HAMILTON M. LAING

In the years from 1932 to 1941, the writer has at times been engaged in biological exploration of the coastal strip of central British Columbia. The following bird notes are offered to indicate extensions of range for many species scantily mentioned in the A.O.U. Check-list of 1931. The region covered includes Vancouver Island from Comox northward to Cape Scott and the opposite mainland from Lang Bay, close by the entrance of Jervis Inlet, to Kimsquit at the head of the Dean Channel. The only considerable penetration inland was made up the Bella Coola Valley, to Stuie, forty miles from salt water, and northward from this point to the western edge of the Rainbow Mountains. In the region of the mainland coast especially, not so difficult of access as hard to investigate when the worker is located, observation must mainly be confined to the flats at the river-mouths of the inlet heads. Steep wooded and rocky mountain sides rising from the salt water are not conducive to extensive travel. Accordingly, these notes are not offered with any idea of completeness. Points worked in this investigation, in the seasons of 1935 to 1940, inclusive, were as follows: Upper Campbell Lake, Sayward, Shushartie and Cape Scott on Vancouver Island; Horseshoe Lake, ten miles inland from mouth of Jervis Inlet, Stuart Island, Bute Inlet, Loughborough Inlet, Kingcome Inlet, Rivers Inlet and near-by Owikeno Lake, Calvert Island, Hagensborg in the Bella Coola valley, and Stuie, forty miles inland on the Atnarko River, Caribou Mountain (south of Atnarko River), head of Mosher Creek (north of Atnarko River), Rainbow Mountains, and Kimsquit at mouth of Dean River, Dean Channel.

As a good part of these observations has been gleaned while engaged in field parties directed by the National Museum of Canada, these notes are published by the kind permission of that institution.

Gavia arctica pacifica. Pacific Loon. Summers fairly commonly, doubtless not breeding, along coastal waters, at least as far south as Stillwater, B.C. Observed to pay daily visits to inland lakes. At Sayward, Vancouver Island, in mid-August, 1935, it was seen daily flying up and down the valley of Salmon River, to and from inland waters. In June and July of 1936 its flight to Horseshoe Lake, about a dozen miles inland, north of Lang Bay (near entrance to Jervis Inlet) were a feature of that camp. Never more than two birds were observed together. Such flights, usually at evening or morning, were well advertised by a strange *Ark-rak-rak-rak*—a dry, vibrant call that could be heard afar. In early June, 1939, these loons were observed several times at Port John, King Island, and later, on July 9 of the same year, two, one a high-colored bird, began making daily visits to the bay at Kimsquit (Dean Channel). Although late July and August appearances might indicate a return of migrants, there is ample evidence to show that the species, in some numbers at least, summers on these waters, both salt and fresh.

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos. White Pelican. Within the last ten years White Pelicans have several times been reported on northward migration in the vicinity of Comox, Vancouver Island. A specimen of date June 15, 1931, in the writer's collection was donated by the local game warden who had seized the bird. This is probably the most westerly route followed by White Pelicans, presumably en route to the breeding colony reported in the Anahim Lake region some seventy miles inland from salt water at Bella Coola.

Querquedula cyanoptera. Cinnamon Teal. The arrival of a breeding pair at the Courtenay slough, midway north on Vancouver Island, on April 30, 1934, and their suspected nesting, kindled hopes of permanent summer residence. This has not come about, perhaps because of the smallness of the breeding area and heavy shooting in each open season. On May 13, 1941, another pair was observed on the same slough.

Aix sponsa. Wood Duck. Although long reported from the southern part of Vancouver Island, the most northerly Island record known to the writer is that of a young male taken unwittingly by a local hunter in the fall of 1938 near Merville. In 1936 on the opposite mainland, Wood Ducks were noted near Horseshoe Lake in mid-July; at Lizard Lake on July 16, three were seen.

Cathartes aura. Turkey Vulture. On August 25, 1936, two buzzards were seen working over the slashing at Grassy Bay, near Roy, Loughborough Inlet.

Buteo lagopus s. johannis. American Rough-legged Hawk. Apparently a rare migrant in the coastal strip. In eighteen years' residence at Comox, the writer has one record only, a juvenal female shot by Ethel M. Laing, October 7, 1940, at Comox.

Aquila chrysaetos canadensis. Golden Eagle. Because of its rarity along the coastal strip, it is perhaps worth recording that on January 21, 1930, a Golden Eagle was seen by the writer near Comox and two days later a specimen shot at Oyster River was donated by Mr. Keith MacKenzie; it was judged to be a second-year bird.

Falco columbarius bendirei. Western Pigeon Hawk. As Comox lies close to the center of the range of the black form, *F. c. suckleyi*, two records of the paler race, *F. c. bendirei*, are noteworthy: immature male, May 6, 1938, and another, May 16, 1939.

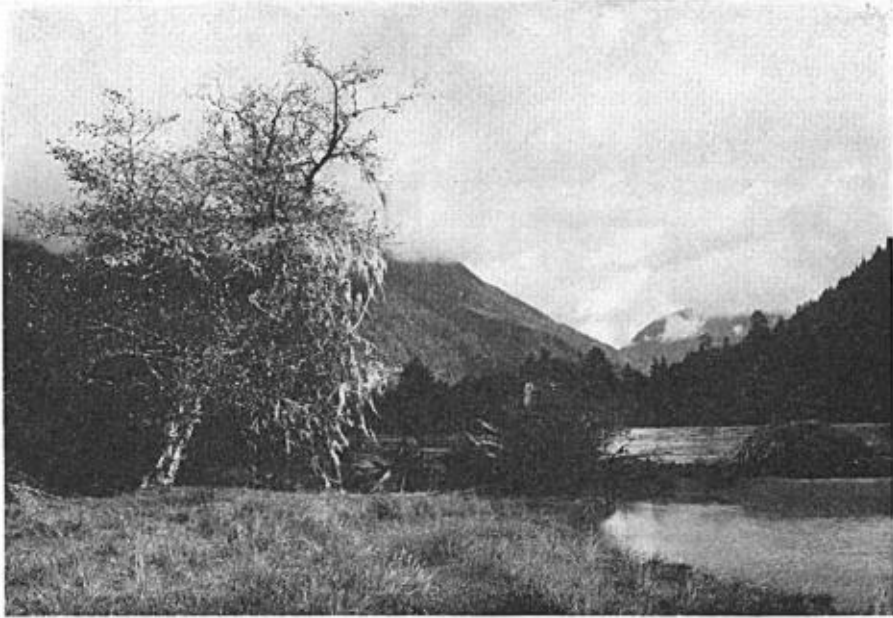


Fig. 61. Mouth of Kingcome River, British Columbia; most northerly point of occurrence of Hutton Vireo.

Ereunetes mauri. Western Sandpiper. This common migrant along the coast showed earliness of southbound migration by appearing at the head of Rivers Inlet on June 28, 1937. Specimens taken were of adult birds with gonads quiescent.

Larus canus brachyrhynchus. Short-billed Gull. When information was given in 1936 of gulls nesting at the second Gordon Pasha Lake, some twelve miles inland from Jarvis Inlet, it was received doubtfully. Probably however it was true, as at the head of River's Inlet on June 28, 1937, a pair of Short-billed Gulls was found nesting on a piling on the site of the old saw mill. The nesting failed because of destruction by ravens and crows. William Billington, one time hatchery employee on near-by Owikeno Lake, gave the information that these gulls formerly had nested on derelict stumps sticking up out of the lake. Again in 1939, on June 22, at the head of the Dean Channel, the writer found a Short-bill brooding on the top of a piling of the abandoned logging wharf near the mouth of the Kimsquit River.

Zenaidura macroura marginella. Western Mourning Dove. Although not known on Vancouver Island north of Comox, on the mainland it has been reported at points from Stillwater to Bella Coola. On September 9, 1936, one was noted on the Halliday farm at the head of Kingcome Inlet. From this date on, one or two were seen here until September 21. On October 9, 1940, at Stuie, 40 miles inland

from Bella Coola, a dove spent part of the day at the writer's cabin, joining with juncos and song sparrows in feeding on some scattered grain.

Bubo virginianus subarcticus. Arctic Horned Owl. It is of interest that in the heavy southern movement of horned owls of the brown and black races that visited Vancouver Island in the winters of 1936 and 1937, two pale birds of the race *subarcticus* were bagged, one on October 30, 1936, and the other on January 10, 1937. Both birds were thin, in contrast to the more numerous brown (*B. v. lagophomus*) and black (*B. v. saturatus*) owls, which were very fat.

Strix occidentalis caurina. Northern Spotted Owl. The writer's contacts with this owl in the coastal strip have been most unsatisfactory, although it is his firm conviction that the bird occurs up the mainland coast as far north as Bella Coola. A male of a nesting pair was taken by the writer at Huntingdon, British Columbia, May 31, 1927; this is close to the United States border. To date the species has not been observed on Vancouver Island. At Horseshoe Lake in the Stillwater region on the mainland, the weird calls of this owl were heard several times in July of 1936. In the same summer at Fawn Bluff, Bute Inlet, another called every evening from the mountain side above Kenzie Lake, but it could not be decoyed out of the jungles.

Asio wilsonianus. Long-eared Owl. Doubtless this species has invaded the Comox area since the removal of the heavy forests. There have been other appearances here, but a quite young male, taken August 26, 1933, in the writer's yard at Comox seems to confirm breeding.

Cryptoglaux acadica acadica. Saw-whet Owl. Although east-central Vancouver Island should be well within the breeding range of this species, only one breeding record has come to light. On August 4, 1933, a very young female was taken in my backyard at Comox. This bird had been mutilated about the head, but this had healed; one eye was gone and the mandibles were so malformed as to be useless. At Nusatsum, Bella Coola valley on July 8, 1938, a nesting tree, the discovery of H. Hammer, was inspected. A young male was taken here. This nesting location was about 19 miles inland.

Dryobates villosus sitkensis. Sitka Hairy Woodpecker. A juvenile was taken at Safety Cove, Calvert Island, on July 31, 1937; birds also were taken at Port John, King Island, June 11, 1939, and at Stuie, August 18, 1940. These seem worthy of note as showing southerly extensions of range.

Dryobates pubescens. Downy Woodpecker. The most notable thing about the Downy Woodpecker at the stations worked is their scarcity. *D. p. gairdneri* was common enough at Comox and as far north as Campbell River on Vancouver Island but it was not found farther up the island nor at any point on the opposite mainland coast. At the mouth of Kingcome River on September 16, 1936, an adult male of *D. p. leucurus*, probably a migrant, was taken, and in 1938 this race was found breeding not uncommonly in the Bella Coola valley from Hagensborg to Stuie. Identification of these latter breeding birds has been confirmed by Dr. L. B. Bishop.

Empidonax traillii brewsteri. Traill Flycatcher. The characteristic call of this bird is now a common sound in the slashings of the eastern slope of Vancouver Island, where it has been traced northward to Cape Scott. On the mainland coast it has been taken at most suitable stations worked as far north as Kimsquit at the mouth of the Dean River.

Progne subis subis. Purple Martin. In view of the scarcity of this bird in the west, it may be worth recording its first appearance at Comox, Vancouver Island. A lone female was seen on May 26 and 27 in 1937. Also on June 20, 1940, two and possibly three were observed to be very noisy about the old pilings at the saw mill near Courtenay. Like many other birds, they probably are following the settlements into the region.

Corvus brachyrhynchos hesperis. Western Crow. Since December 8, 1933, when the writer definitely established the Western Crow as a winter resident in the Comox area (Canadian Field Nat., 49, 1935:56), this bird has not failed to appear each winter in greater numbers, mixing freely with the common native coastal form (*caurinus*). The two have been found to have a meeting place northward about the heads of several inlets. This was noted particularly at Rivers Inlet, in July and August of 1937, at North Bentick Arm, in June and July of 1938, and in Dean Channel (Kimsquit) in July and August of 1939. Whether this meeting of the two forms constituted a complete breeding fusion or mere meeting, could not be learned except by the difficult collecting of nesting pairs. The certainty is that especially at Kimsquit the two forms intermingled freely on the same area in the breeding season.

Nucifraga columbiana. Clark Nutcracker. In "A Distributional List of the Birds of British Columbia," Brooks and Swarth (Pac. Coast Avif. No. 17, 1925:81) report the nutcracker as "A rare straggler on Vancouver Island"; this will now bear some revision. The noting of a single noisy nutcracker at high elevation in the Forbidden Plateau on the island, June 19, 1935, suggests possible breeding. In the autumn of that year there was a small migration to the Campbell River area. They were heard and seen by the writer on November 5 and about this time they attracted the attention

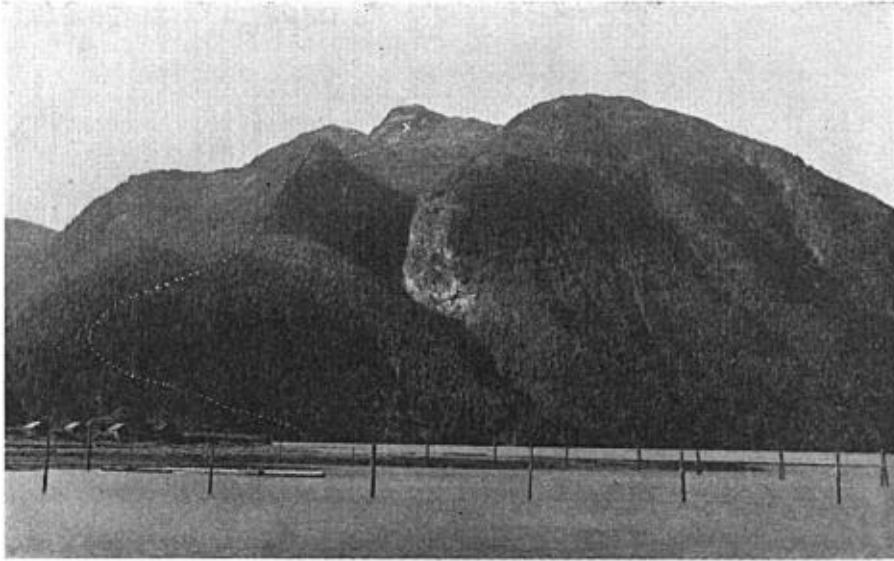


Fig. 62. Head of Rivers Inlet. Dotted line indicates course of three-day trip from salt water to alpine realm of Hepburn Rosy Finch.

of other deer hunters. The species is well known in the Bella Coola valley, and is common at Stuie and northward in the Rainbow Mountains. It was met at salt water at Kimsquit, in July, 1939.

Dumetella carolinensis. Catbird. Absent apparently from the mainland coast immediately north of the Fraser River and on Vancouver Island. It reaches the coast at Bella Coola, however. It is common at Stuie, on the Atnarko River 40 miles inland, but is less so at Hagensborg, 12 miles up the Bella Coola Valley. It probably reaches salt water at the mouth of the Bella Coola River.

Hylocichla. Thrushes. The taking of five races of *Hylocichla* within a few miles and on almost common breeding grounds at Stuie in the summers of 1938, 1939 and 1940 would seem noteworthy. *Hylocichla g. guttata* bred from near sea level at Hagensborg to 5200 feet at the head of Mosher Creek. *H. ustulata swainsoni* coming westward from the interior met *H. u. ustulata* coming up from the coast in the vicinity of Stuie. *H. minima aliciae* shared the breeding ground at Mosher Creek at high elevation with the above *H. guttata*. *H. fuscescens salicicola* was common in the deciduous woods along the Atnarko and Bella Coola rivers, descending the valley to Hagensborg. At Kimsquit in 1939, *H. f. salicicola* was taken at salt water near the mouth of the Dean River, where it was common.

Sialia currucoides. Mountain Bluebird. The most southerly breeding records known to the writer are as follows: On July 8, 1936, at Horseshoe Lake, in one of the wide slashings, a nesting pair was located. The male was collected by George Holland, assistant to the expedition. On Vancouver Island, about 12 miles inland in the wide slashings near the Oyster River, on May 15, 1939, a pair showed unmistakably that they had a nest, although time did not allow search for the site.

Corthylio calendula. Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Ruby-crowns on the breeding grounds of the Kimsquit and Bella Coola areas proved of interest. In July of 1939 at Kimsquit, kinglets were found breeding in the mixed woods of spruce, Douglas fir, birch, willow and poplar at salt water along the shore of the Dean River flat. Next year, in July, at 5200 feet, at the head of Mosher Creek in the Stuie region, Ruby-crowns were breeding commonly in the alpine fir clumps at timber line. Although plumage of the Kimsquit specimens was badly worn, the race suggested is *C. c. grinnelli*. The specimens from high elevations were paler and lacked the dark throat and breast of *grinnelli*; they are referable to *C. c. calendula*.

Bombycilla cedrorum. Cedar Waxwing. This waxwing has followed civilization up the coast. It has been observed at practically all stations worked from Cape Scott in 1935 to Kimsquit in 1939. At the latter station in July a small company of about a dozen stayed about the site of the old canner, yet until August 5 they showed no signs of breaking up for breeding.

Vireo huttoni huttoni. Hutton Vireo. Taken on Vancouver Island by the writer as far north as San Josef. A breeding pair was collected on July 4, 1933, and another specimen on September 15, 1935,

at Cape Scott by Kenneth Racey. On the mainland a juvenal female was taken at the head of Kingcome Inlet on September 13, 1936; it probably was a migrant from a more northerly home.

Vireo olivaceus. Red-eyed Vireo. Though reported by Swarth from the southern end of Vancouver Island in 1912, the bird was not found at Comox until 1941. On June 25 a male that had sung for some days on the ranch of the writer was collected for record. There was no proof of nesting; but five days later another male was singing at the same site. It was a surprise then when on August 1, 1936, at Fawn Bluff near the mouth of Bute Inlet, the song of the Red-eye came strongly from the hillside. It probably was nesting here. This bird was collected on August 17 by C. J. Guiguet. Next day after moving camp to Grassy Bay, Loughborough Inlet, Red-eyes again were found at salt water. Although not found at the Kingcome Inlet camp between September 9 and 26, 1936, it was doubtless there earlier in the season. It was not found in 1937 at the head of Rivers Inlet but in 1938 it was encountered commonly in the Bella Coola valley at Hagensborg. It was next met at salt water at Kimsquit at the mouths of the Dean and Kimsquit rivers. The gap in the range of this bird along the southwesterly coast of the Province may be explained by the fact that apparently many birds of eastern origin do not reach the west coast from the south but come down the river valleys from the interior, that is from the east.

Vireo gilvus swainsoni. Western Warbling Vireo. The 1931 Check-list (p. 279) states that this vireo breeds southward from "southern British Columbia," but this statement is much too conservative.

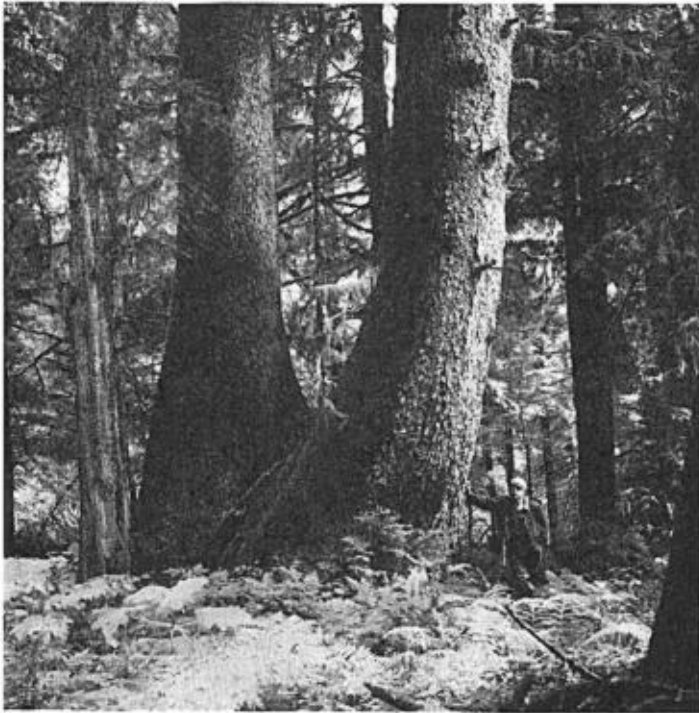


Fig. 63. Sitka spruces on densely wooded banks of Whonnock River, head of Rivers Inlet. Redstart first noted here at salt water in 1937.

The bird is to be found up the entire easterly slope of Vancouver Island to Cape Scott in almost every suitable habitat: deciduous woods of alder, willow, etc. It occurs also in most of the similar places on the flats at the mouths of the mainland coastal rivers. It is even more common to the north, as in the Bella Coola valley and at Kimsquit.

Vermivora peregrina. Tennessee Warbler. It was rather a surprise in 1939 to find this warbler breeding at salt water on the Dean River flat at Kimsquit. A female and nestling were taken here on July 14. To prove that this was no isolated record, the male of another family was collected on July 18.

Dendroica nigrescens. Black-throated Gray Warbler. Records of this warbler for Vancouver Island would seem to be in doubt. To date no collector of the several who have worked in the Comox area has produced a specimen. Exploration on the mainland coast, however, has met with better success. Suspected at Horseshoe Lake in July, 1936, the Black-throated Gray was finally taken on Stuart Island at the mouth of Bute Inlet by C. J. Guiguet on July 24; the specimen is a juvenal female. Several were seen here. At Fawn Bluff on Bute Inlet it was met again by both Guiguet and the writer, but it was not encountered again until 1938 when in the Bella Coola valley it was found by no means rare from Stuie to Hagensborg; breeding specimens were taken. At Kimsquit in June and July of 1939 this elusive warbler, so confusing when on the same ground as the Townsend, was not secured, although it probably was seen once by the writer. In 1940 it was fairly common in the Atnarko valley at Stuie.

Dendroica striata. Black-poll Warbler. On July 16, 1940, at the headwaters of Mosher Creek, on the high alpine plateau at over 5000 feet, two singing males were encountered. One of these was collected for record. The other male continued to sing and was seen many times later, although nesting was not established. On August 1, however, while calling up birds a mile from the previous site, another male came in close, accompanied by a female. This summering ground lies north of the Atnarko River and about forty miles from salt water.

Seiurus noveboracensis. Water-thrush. A juvenal female taken on August 27, 1936, at Grassy Bay, Loughborough Inlet, was a surprise. In 1938, however, exploration of the Bella Coola valley showed the bird to be a not uncommon breeder at Stuie on the Atnarko River, 40 miles above salt water. Water-thrushes ranged downstream at least as far as the junction of the Talchako.

Icteria virens longicauda. Long-tailed Chat. Occasional appearances of the chat in the Comox area would indicate that the bird may become a regular summer resident. At midnight of May 26, 1934, as the writer walked home from Courtenay in the moonlight, a chat was waking the echoes from thickets along the Puntledge River. With the chat songs of the lower Columbia River valley but a day old in ear, there could be no mistaking that moonlight sonata. On June 15, 1940, at exactly the same place a chat was again heard in mighty song, this time at noon. Five days later, in the evening, he was still chanting jubilantly.

Setophaga ruticilla. American Redstart. Not known to date from Vancouver Island, but the species appears northward on the mainland coast. It was first suspected at the head of Rivers Inlet on June 19, 1937, when a singing male was pursued and shot but lost. It next turned up as a com-

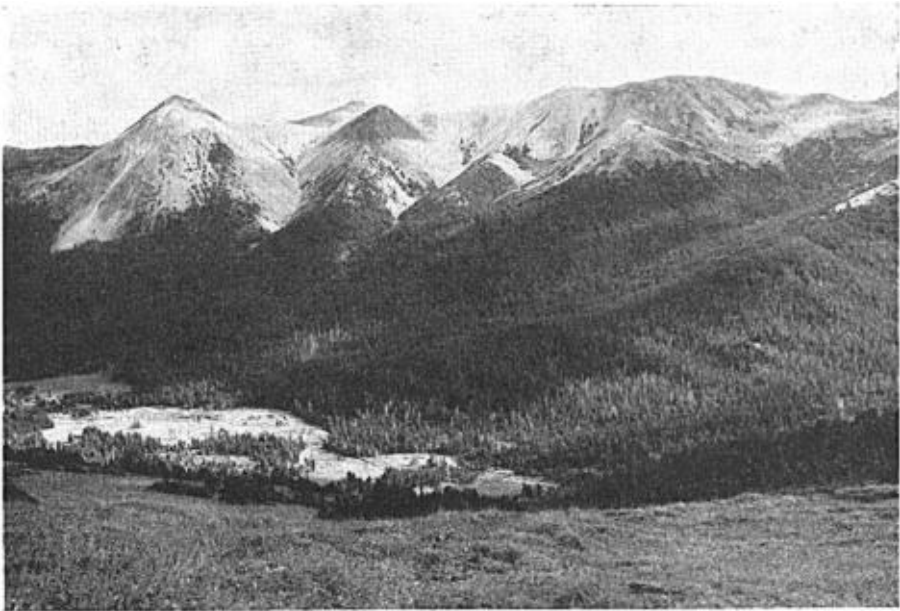


Fig. 64. View across Mackenzie Valley to western edge of Rainbow Mountains; photograph from an elevation of 6500 feet.

mon breeder in the Bella Coola valley in June of 1938, where it was taken at Hagensborg but found more numerous farther inland. At Kimsquit in 1939 it was one of the commonest summer birds in the mixed woods along the shore of the Dean flat at salt water.

Sturnella neglecta. Western Meadowlark. At camp at Cape Scott, from September 13 to 30, 1935, meadowlarks were several times seen by the members of the party. On September 26, R. E. Lusher noted three of the birds. These were migrants from unknown source. They were reported uncommon in autumn in Bella Coola valley. On October 12, 1939, a single bird was noted there by the writer on the Wright ranch and later this or another tried to winter there. On October 9, 1940, another lone straggler was noted at Stuie.

Molothrus ater. Cowbird. The most westerly record that could be expected of the Cowbird was made at Safety Cove, Calvert Island, on August 10, 1937, when a young one scarcely of independent age was shot. A Yellow Warbler was suspected of being foster parent.

**Hedymeles melanocephalus melanocephalus*. Black-headed Grosbeak. Long known to breeding on Vancouver Island as far north at least as Lower Quinsam Lake, this species has more recently been traced up the mainland coast as follows: breeding at Horseshoe Lake, June 24, 1936, and at Fawn Bluff, Bute Inlet, August 1, 1936. Later in 1938 it was found to be a common summer resident of the Bella Coola valley at least as far down as Hagensborg and probably reaching the river mouth.

Passerina amoena. Lazuli Bunting. There is an early record by Wm. Spreadborough of a female taken June 23, 1893, at Comox. The writer has never in seventeen years found it here nor at any mainland coastal station in the dozen worked. Thus the taking of a juvenal male on September 9, 1935, by R. E. Lusher, at Shushartie, northern Vancouver Island, must be regarded as unusual.

Carpodacus purpureus. Purple Finch. Specimens of *Carpodacus* from the Bella Coola valley, July 8, 1938, and Kimsquit, June 29, July 7, and July 13, 1939, at which latter site the species bred commonly, are noteworthy in that they may be regarded as an extension of range westward for the eastern race rather than northward for *C. p. californicus*. Major Allan Brooks, who has studied these specimens critically, has found them intermediate between the two races, the color favoring *californicus*, the wing formula *C. p. purpureus*.

Carpodacus cassinii. Cassin Purple Finch. The taking of specimens from a family of young of this species at Mosher Creek, near Stuie, 5200 feet, July 31, 1940, would seem to be a considerable extension of range northward.

Pinicola enucleator. Pine Grosbeak. In the region under consideration this is an uncommon bird. At Comox a small flock of a dozen was observed at Black Creek on January 14, 1941. In summer it was found by the author only on King and Calvert Islands and at the head of Rivers Inlet, where doubtless it was breeding. At the latter site, 3 specimens were taken on July 2 and 3, 1937, but as no high-plumaged males were obtained, the material is unsatisfactory for racial identification. The specimens measure small and suggest *P. e. carlottae*.

Spinus tristis salicamans. Willow Goldfinch. "Extreme southwestern B. C.," the northern limit set by the Check-list must be modified, as this goldfinch has long been common in the Comox region and northward on Vancouver Island. It has been reported also from Powell River on the opposite mainland. Of stations worked on the mainland, it was met only at Stuart Island at the mouth of Bute Inlet, but apparently it is known to some residents of the Bella Coola valley.

Comox, British Columbia, January 31, 1942.