

Baja California Sur's first record of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)

Steven G. Mlodinow

4819 Gardner Avenue

Everett, Washington 98203

(email: sgmlod@aol.com)

Bill Tweit

P.O. Box 1271

Olympia, Washington 98507

(email: sebnabgill@aol.com)

ABSTRACT

This article documents a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) at San Antonio, Baja California Sur, Mexico, a first for that state, and considers molt timing and other issues relevant to field identification of this species vis-à-vis Red-naped Sapsucker (*S. nuchalis*).

Field Encounter

On 25 October 2002, we found a sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus* sp.) feeding on palm fruits in the village of San Antonio, approximately 45 km south of La Paz, Baja California Sur. We initially identified it as a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*S. varius*). Its crown and throat were completely red, the transocular stripe was largely black with some buff flecking, and there was a complete dark border surrounding the red throat that was moderately flecked in yellow-buff. The throat's red did not intrude into this border. The back was broadly barred black and buff. The chest was a dusky hue mottled with buff. The nape was devoid of red. Figures 1–6 illustrate these features.

Discussion

The separation of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker from Red-naped Sapsucker (*S. nuchalis*) poses significant challenges. One difference between these species is that juvenile Red-naped Sapsuckers typically molt on their breeding grounds, whereas juvenile Yellow-bellieds usually do so on their wintering

grounds, sometimes not attaining full adult plumage until March (Pyle 1997). This discrepancy often has been used to identify vagrant Yellow-bellieds in states of the West Coast, as the majority of such are first-year birds. The assumption has been that a bird in juvenile plumage in winter is a Yellow-bellied. To some extent, the reverse has been assumed as well, especially regarding fall migrants: a bird showing significant adult-like plumage should not be a Yellow-bellied. Because our bird clearly showed several adult features, we were concerned that it might be

a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker × Red-naped Sapsucker hybrid.

Mlodinow sent videographs (including Figures 1–6) of the San Antonio sapsucker to several knowledgeable birders and ornithologists: Jocelyn Hudon, Paul Lehman, Tony Leukering, Michael O'Brien, and Will Russell. All agreed that the bird's plumage was consistent with Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and inconsistent with Red-naped. Though none of these marks, by themselves, are conclusive, the important characteristics mentioned were as follows: 1) red throat com-



Figures 1–6. This Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a first for Baja California Sur, Mexico, was videotaped at San Antonio, 25 October 2002. Note that the red throat is surrounded by black and that there is no red on the nape, characters of typical Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Though the back pattern is perhaps more typical of Red-naped, it is within the range of pure Yellow-bellied, per Hudson's research and the authors' review of museum specimens. The pale bars on the back were distinctly butter-colored, which would be atypical for Red-naped. Photographs from videotape by Steven G. Mlodinow.

pletely surrounded in black, sometimes mottled with buff, but with no intrusion of red; 2) no red on nape; and 3) fairly broad butter-yellow barring on back. Additionally, juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers have butter-colored mottling in the malar stripe, transocular stripe, and dusky chest band, whereas juvenile Red-naped Sapsuckers usually lack mottling on their malar and auriculars and have grayish mottling on the chest (Mlodinow 2003). The San Antonio bird showed buffy mottling in all three areas, the color of which was more apparent in the field than on the videographs.

Despite the strong evidence provided by the plumage, Russell expressed concern regarding the bird's advanced stage of molt and thought that this might be a sign of hybridization with Red-naped Sapsucker. Hudon (*in litt.*), who studies hybrid sapsuckers, stated that this bird would score as a pure Yellow-bellied in his research framework (<www.pma.edmonton.ab.ca/natural/birds/projects/results.htm>). He also added that the zone of hybridization is limited to southwestern Alberta, with the entire hybrid population likely numbering fewer than 5000. To study the molt-timing issue further, Mlodinow reviewed 19 first-year Yellow-bellied Sapsucker specimens at the Field Museum of Natural History, all collected between 14 September and 16 November. Of these,

only nine were entirely, or almost entirely, in juvenal plumage. One bird, collected in Chicago as early as 25 September, already had a nearly adult black face pattern, a full red throat, and a moderate amount of red on the crown (#368337). Another bird, collected on 10 October in northeastern Illinois (#325782), had a completely red throat and crown, as the San Antonio bird did. Mlodinow, Jessie Barry, and Cameron Cox reviewed first-year Yellow-bellied Sapsucker specimens at the University of Washington's Burke Museum and found that four of six birds collected in October showed substantial adult characteristics. A bird collected on 11 October in Maryland (#41290), already had a half-black chest band, a crown that was approximately 50% red, and a throat that was greater than 50% red. Another specimen from 16 October in Massachusetts (#33549) had a throat that was almost entirely red and a crown that was 50% red. Interestingly, most of the birds with advanced plumage in both collections were males. Consequently, we concluded that signs of adult plumage in first-year fall Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are not infrequent and that hybridization is an unlikely explanation for such birds.

The San Antonio Yellow-bellied Sapsucker represented Baja California Sur's first record. There are also at least ten records from the Baja Peninsula's northern third,

spanning 18 October and 3 March (Erickson and Howell 2001).

Acknowledgments

We extend thanks to Jocelyn Hudon, Paul Lehman, Tony Leukering, Michael O'Brien, and Will Russell for carefully examining the videographs of this sapsucker and tendering their thoughts on them. A substantial debt of gratitude is also owed to David Willard at the Field Museum of Natural History and to Rob Fawcett and Sievert Rohwer at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture for access to their collections. Finally, we thank Jessie Barry and Cameron Cox for help in reviewing specimen material.

Literature cited

- Erickson, R.A., and Howell, S.N.G., eds. 2001. *Birds of the Baja California Peninsula*. Monographs in Field Ornithology, No. 3. American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, Colorado.
- Mlodinow, S. G. 2003. Vagrancy of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) from Washington to Baja California, with notes on identification of juveniles. *Oregon Birds* 29: 27-30.
- Pyle, P. 1997. *Identification Guide to North American Birds*. Part 1. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, California. 📖

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE ABA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE


Aves de Panamá (Birds of Panama)

25 September-1 October 2005 ♦ Gamboa Rainforest Resort, Gamboa, Panama

Are you ready for birding in the tropics? Would you like to see brightly colored tanagers and tropical toucans? We have five exciting days of field trips planned amid the forests of Panama's Canal Zone. Birding at the world famous Pipeline Road, up on the Canopy Tower, in the dry forest habitats near town, in both Atlantic and Pacific Forest habitats, and one day in the cooler foothills, is all included in the conference itinerary. Combine birding opportunities on the 340 acres of the 4-star Gamboa Rainforest Resort with our guest evening speakers who really know Panama and its wildlife well and the results should prove to make this conference an experience of a lifetime. During the short week we should record over 300 bird species. In addition there will be frequent flybys of huge blue morpho and other brightly colored butterflies, sleepy sloths in cecropia trees, caiman and crocodiles basking in Gatun Lake, four species of monkeys are possible, and there are always surprises. Tour companies will offer both pre- and post conference trips to areas outside of Panama's Canal Zone for those who want a complete emersion into the avifaunal possibilities that beautiful Panama has to offer.



P.O. Box 6599 • Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6599 • (800) 850-2473 ext. 233 • www.americanbirding.org

 American Birding Association®