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FIRST RECORD OF YELLOW-BROWED WARBLER (*PHYLLOSCOPUS INORNATUS*) IN NORTH AMERICA

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For many years I have had an interest in the autumn migration in western Alaska's islands. In addition to a single fall visit to Attu Island, in the western Aleutians, in 1993, I have been able to visit Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, in early fall 1992 (six days in late August), 1997 (seven days in late August), 1998 (16 days, through early September), and 1999 (45 days, 20 August to 3 October). Fay and Cade (1959) and Sealy et al. (1971) made detailed censuses on Saint Lawrence Island, primarily in summer, during the 1950s and 1960s. Birders have visited Gambell regularly during the late spring (late May and early June) since the mid-1970s. My extended stay in 1999 was highlighted by the discovery of a number of Asian strays, including the Long-toed (*Calidris subminuta*) and Temminck's (*C. temminckii*) stints, multiple Common Ringed (*Charadrius hiaticula*) and Mongolian (*C. mongolus*) plovers, a Cuculus cuckoo (probably the Oriental, *C. saturatus*), Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*), and Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*). I also noted a moderate number of strays from mainland Alaska, a number of late departure dates for the western part of the state, and a few record high counts, particularly of several seabirds.

The most unusual species I found in 1999 was North America's first Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*), which was present 23–24 September. The bird frequented two of Gambell's three "boneyards," a habitat characterized by disturbed nutrient-rich ground that supports a lush growth of a mintlike vegetation, which, by late summer, grows to a height of up to a foot or so. In contrast to the very short tundra vegetation and extensive gravel found elsewhere around Gambell, this bogyard vegetation acts as a magnet to many species of passerines, both regular migrants and vagrants.

The following description of the Yellow-browed Warbler is copied from my field notes, written both days the bird was present. On 23 September: "First seen hovering-gleaning food off dense, low mint vegetation in 'far bogyard,' then quickly disappeared, and then flushed and dove back into cover. My first impression was of either a large kinglet or a smallish *Phylloscopus*. The bird also seemed a bit brighter and more contrasty above, and smaller overall, than a typical Arctic Warbler would look. Then began a 3-hour session as I chased the bird around the north end of the bogyard, getting many looks at it in flight and quick looks of it on the ground between long periods when it was buried in the vegetation. Or there would be periods of up to 30 minutes during which I could not refind it at all or would leave it alone so that it would filter back into its favored area before I would flush it again. Managed to take one mediocre [poor] photo of it today. Did not hear it call.

A smallish *Phylloscopus*, clearly smaller than a typical Arctic Warbler (*P. borealis*), but just slightly longer looking (but slimmer bodied) than a kinglet, with a shorter, finer bill than an Arctic Warbler, with a pale base to the lower mandible. Crown a gray-green, with the rear crown and upper nape showing a pale (dirty whitish or grayish white) skinny line—a partial median crown stripe. Back and rump a pretty unmarked medium pure greenish, almost a "moss green"; the back and rump were the same color, showing no contrast [contra Pallas' Warbler, *P. proregulus*]. Upperside of tail tinged greenish but duller than rump. Bold straight pale supercilium tinged pale yellow (not strong yellow) and bordered below by a thin dark eyeline. Wings showed two

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wingbars, a bold lower bar (formed by tips to greater coverts) that was whitish tinged yellow and a shorter and narrower upper bar that looked whitish. There were distinct broad whitish edges to the tertials—at least three—repeatedly seen. These edges were accentuated by the darkness of the tertial feather centers, which were the darkest feathers on the wing. Overall the wing was rather contrasty looking—more so than in the Arctic Warbler—and this effect was visible a number of times even when the bird was in flight. The underparts were a whitish color throughout, perhaps with a faint dusky color on the sides of the breast. The legs and feet were a dusky color of some sort throughout, not black and not distinctly pale (i. e., not yellow or fleshy). The bird acted quite nervous at times, and was seen several times to flick its wings, kinglet fashion.”

Additional details from 24 September: “Bird still present. Many repeated brief but good views again in far boneyard. Light became good at times as well. Today I was able to get some 20 photos of the bird (Figure 1). Pale yellow of supercilium easier to see in some lights than in others. Bird seen flicking its wings on numerous occasions. Incredibly, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) [casual on the island] appeared 30–100 feet away for about 5 minutes or so. Overall size of the Yellow-browed Warbler and kinglet almost the same, the Yellow-browed being possibly just a tad longer, if any, and body sleeker, not as pot-bellied as the kinglet (which appeared slightly puffed up in the 37° F temperatures). Then, had stunning views of the warbler in the evening, when it moved a relatively short distance to the “circular boneyard.” A couple of fine details now noted: the pale yellow supercilium pales at the rearmost section to an off white and appears either to stay straight or to curve upward slightly. And, the flight feathers (secondaries and base of primaries) are thinly edged with dull yellowish, as are the tail feathers.”

I identified the bird as a Yellow-browed Warbler after my first good view of it (a minute or two after first glimpsing it). I had seen numbers of the species previously in Asia (China, Malaysia), as well as numbers of Hume’s Leaf-Warblers (*P. humei*) (in China, plus single individuals in Holland and Israel) and a single Pallas’ Leaf-Warbler in China. Hume’s and Pallas’ leaf-warblers are the most similar species, sharing the small size and distinct white tertial edges. Pallas’ is eliminated by its head pattern (bolder overall, with a much more distinctive median crown stripe) and by its showing a contrasting yellowish rump. Hume’s is eliminated by the Gambell bird’s brighter and more contrasty plumage, moss-green upperparts, distinct upper wingbar, pale yellow rather than dull buff supercilium, and very blackish tertials. Hume’s was formerly considered a subspecies of the Yellow-browed but was recently split as a separate species (see Alstrom and Olsson 1988). Other species of olive wing-barred *Phylloscopus* that breed in northeastern Asia, including the Arctic Warbler, Greenish Warbler (*P. trochiloides*), Pale-legged Leaf-Warbler (*P. tenellipes*), and Eastern Crowned Leaf-Warbler (*P. coronatus*), are eliminated by their larger size, details of head pattern, and, especially, by their lack of white edges to the tertials (Vaurie 1959, Baker 1997, Mullarney et al. 1999).

The Yellow-browed Warbler has a huge breeding range in Russia, where it is “one of the commonest Siberian birds” (Dement’ev and Gladkov 1954). It breeds in coniferous, mixed, and low birch, willow, and poplar woodlands from the Ural Mountains east all the way to the western Anadyr Basin, the northern Sea of Okhotsk, and Ussuriland in eastern Siberia, south to Mongolia, northern Manchuria, and (probably) northern Korea. It winters mostly in southeast Asia, from India east to southeast China and the Malay Peninsula (Dement’ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Baker 1997). Hume’s Leaf-Warbler has a more southerly breeding distribution, in southern and central Asia east to central China (Dement’ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Baker 1997).

The Yellow-browed Warbler has been anticipated in Alaska (e.g., Balch 1980, Røberson 1988). It is a regularly occurring vagrant from Siberia to Britain and

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Figure 1. North America's first Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, 23–24 September 1999. Note the pale yellow wash to the supercilium, greenish upperparts, grayish green crown, yellowish edgings to the flight feathers, and, especially, the bold white edges to the blackish tertials.

Photo by Paul Lehman

elsewhere in western Europe in the late fall. Cottridge and Vinicombe (1996) termed it "the commonest Siberian vagrant to western Europe," and noted that an average of just under 100 individuals occur there annually, with at least 615 birds found in 1985.

That this species had not been found in Alaska until now may be at least partly the result of the limited autumn coverage of the islands of the Bering Sea. Some vagrant species, such as the Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler (*Locustella ochotensis*) and Little Bunting, are more likely to occur in Alaska during the fall than during the spring. The Yellow-browed Warbler may be another example.

This record of the Yellow-browed Warbler has been accepted by Alaska authorities as the 457th species known to have occurred in that state (D. D. Gibson, *in litt.*, 1 November 1999).

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Accepted 10 December 1999