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FIRST RECORD OF THE LANCEOLATED WARBLER BREEDING IN NORTH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT: The Lanceolated Warbler (*Locustella lanceolata*) is a Eurasian species whose breeding range reaches east to include northern Japan, the Kuril Islands, and the Kamchatka Peninsula. It has been recorded three times previously in North America—twice in the western Aleutian Islands, Alaska, once in California. During our work at Buldir Island, western Aleutian Islands, in 2007, we documented the fourth occurrence of the species and the first nesting record within the political limits of North America.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Buldir Island is a 2000-ha (6.4 km × 3.2 km) volcanic outcrop located approximately 100 km from Kiska Island to the east and 130 km from Shemya Island to the west in the western Aleutian Islands, Alaska (Figure 1). Located at 52° 21' N, 175° 56' E, Buldir Island experiences weather typical of a northern maritime climate. The average temperature at sea level is approximately 7.7° C in the summer and 3.7° C annually, and precipitation averages about 81 cm annually, on the basis of weather data from similarly sized Shemya Island. Strong winds, fog, and light rain are common.

Part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, Buldir Island is the site of a long-term seabird-monitoring station operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (see Andersen 2007). The island's importance for migrant birds from Asia has been previously documented (Byrd et al. 1978, Byrd and Day 1986). We were present on the island from 29 May through 27 August 2007 as biologists for the refuge. Our duties during this period included the documentation of all bird species occurring on the island.

RESULTS

We observed several migrant passerines of Asiatic origin on Buldir during the first and second weeks of June 2007, following strong southwest winds. We first noted the Lanceolated Warbler (Figure 2; see also photo on this

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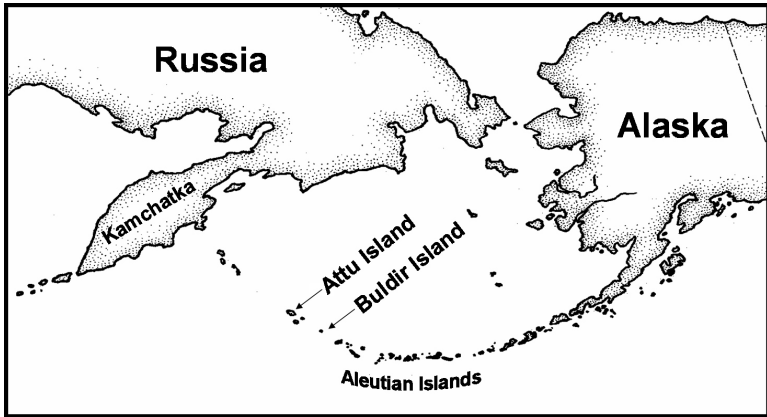


Figure 1. Location of Buldir Island in the western Aleutian Islands.

issue's front cover) on 8 June, when a single male was heard singing in the alluvial valley near the main camp. Identification was made by eliminating the two other streaked species of *Locustella* that occur in eastern Asia, Pallas's Grasshopper-Warbler (*L. certhiola*) and Common Grasshopper-Warbler (*L. naevia*), by the criteria summarized by Hickey et al. (1996).

Over the next two days (9–10 June), we found a total of four Lanceolated Warblers singing in the two valleys that constitute the majority of the island's flat lowlands (Figure 3; audio and video recordings are archived at the University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks). Songs were typically introduced by short, interrupted stretches of singing that gradually extended into a continuous metallic trill reminiscent of a decelerated Common Grasshopper-Warbler.



Figure 2. Lanceolated Warbler on Buldir Island, Alaska, August 2007. From vocalizations and analysis of photographs of the two adult birds present in August, this individual was the female.

Photo by Cornelius Schlawe

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Figure 3. Territory of occupied by Lanceolated Warblers on Buldir Island, Alaska, August 2007.

Photo by Cornelius Schlawe

All four birds appeared to be establishing territories and, except during a period of decreased activity in the afternoon, they could be heard singing nearly continuously throughout the day and dusk.

While observing and photographing one of the singing males on 12 June, we flushed a second individual, likely a female, from the territory; thus at least five Lanceolated Warblers were on Buldir in the spring of 2007. At least three of the male warblers continued to sing for the next week. By 18 June only one individual was still singing, and we continued to see it until 21 June, when the species was last observed before a 53-day hiatus.

On 11 August Schlawe located a Lanceolated Warbler in the same area where the pair had been noted in June. The bird was agitated by his approach and issued strong warning calls for 15 minutes before disappearing into the vegetation. The warning call can be characterized as a “chack” similar to the warning call of the Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) but slightly higher in pitch and less wooden.

The bird shortly reappeared carrying an insect, but the agitation and warning notes continued, and the food was subsequently swallowed. Schlawe then concealed himself in nearby vegetation, and over the course of 36 minutes observed the warbler making food deliveries on three occasions (Figure 4).

The food items were delivered to a small meadow characterized by short sedges and grasses interspersed with tussocks of tall grass. The bird foraged in the tall vegetation surrounding the meadow. Upon arriving near the presumed nest, the bird alighted on one of the grass tussocks before dropping into the shorter grass and sedges at the base of the tussock. Although the transfer of food to chicks was obscured by vegetation, the fact that the food

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Figure 4. Lanceolated Warbler carrying insects on Buldir Island, Alaska, August 2007.

Photo by Cornelius Schlawe

was consistently delivered to the same location suggested that the chicks were relatively immobile at the time.

Approximately 25 minutes after the last food delivery, a second Lanceolated Warbler approached the area. This bird appeared slightly darker than the first individual, and later analysis of photographs revealed that the two individuals could be distinguished readily. The feathers of the second bird were more worn, particularly in the coverts, scapulars and crown, accounting for the overall darker appearance. Additionally, the second individual showed a conspicuous amount of orange on the maxilla that contrasted markedly with the primarily dark maxilla of the first bird. After it was seen singing on a later visit, we identified this second bird as a male and thus presumed the first individual was the female. The male uttered a few warning calls and quickly disappeared.

On 12 and 13 August Andersen visited the area where Schlawe had seen the food deliveries. Although he saw the adult birds and heard their warning calls on both days, he noted no further evidence of nesting on these visits.

On 16 August Andersen flushed two individuals from an area of relatively short sedge and grass. One of the birds was clearly an adult, but the other appeared darker and flew in a weaker, less direct manner. The two birds flushed approximately 15 m in different directions; the adult perched and began giving the alarm call. By this time, three other observers had reached the site and the dark bird was flushed a second time at closer range. The bird had the same shape and general appearance of the adult but fresh flight feathers and large amounts of downy juvenal plumage on the back and rump. The dark

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bird flew in a manner similar to that of the adult, but more exaggerated—very fast wing beats with the body tilted into a more vertical position. The bird's flight was straight and ended with an abrupt drop into the vegetation. The bird was flushed a third time, and although the views were brief, the examination was ample to identify it as a juvenile Lanceolated Warbler.

Over the next four hours, our team spread across the site, seeing and hearing the warblers several times. The adult gave occasional alarm calls, and a second call was noted in the region where the fledgling alighted. The juvenile's note was a very high "cheep" typically issued singly with long periods between calls. The juvenile moved through the area, primarily in the direction of the calling adult, but never left the cover of the vegetation.

During this time, the adults were active nearby. The female was heard issuing the "chack" call on several occasions and was often seen perched on top of vegetation. At ~14:00 both adult birds were present at the site. The male was observed carrying food and singing a short (1–2 seconds) rendition of the extended song heard in June, enabling us to sex the two adult birds and confirm that both parents participated in chick-rearing. While carrying food, the male perched on vegetation three times for 10–30 seconds and gave the abbreviated song. The juvenile answered from nearby and moved in the direction of the adult. The adult bird appeared nervous and swallowed the food after the third appearance above the vegetation—the two birds were never closer than 10 m during this time. Activity decreased during mid-afternoon, and we returned to camp.

On 18 August, Andersen noted two adult Lanceolated Warblers calling at the site, indicating that both the male and female make the "chack" note. This final observation was followed by several days of inclement weather, and the Lanceolated Warblers were not resighted again before our 27 August departure.

DISCUSSION

Although this is the first confirmed breeding record of the Lanceolated Warbler for North America, there is some suggestion that the species may have nested in the Aleutians in the past. The first report of it there (Tobish 1985) involved at least 25 individuals observed between 4 June and 15 July 1984 on Attu Island, approximately 180 km west of Buldir. One of those was observed carrying possible nesting material on 9 June. There was no evidence of nesting associated with the second American occurrence, of a juvenile banded on Southeast Farallon Island, California, on 11 September 1995 (Hickey et al. 1996) or the third, of single birds reported at Attu on 2 June and 6 June 2000 (Gibson and Byrd 2007). Other species of Asiatic birds also have been recorded breeding occasionally in the western Aleutians, particularly in years when spring storms caused substantial "fallouts" (Gibson and Byrd 2007).

The activity of the warblers at Buldir Island after the chick had fledged was restricted to a valley floor and covered a fairly large area. Based on mapping by means of the global-positioning system, the territory used by the nesting warblers covered approximately 2.8 ha and had an average elevation of 13 m. The site was located in a triangular alluvial valley where surrounding hills likely sheltered the warblers from the high winds characteristic of the island.

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Vegetation in the territory consisted of a patchwork mosaic of several herbaceous habitat types described by Byrd (1984). About 60% of the territory contained tall plant cover (canopy height >1 m); the majority of the Lanceolated Warblers' foraging seemed to occur in this habitat. Dominant species included Sand Ryegrass (*Leymus arenarius*), Pacific Reedgrass (*Calamagrostis nutkaënsis*, fide Hultén 1968), Ladyfern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*), and Seacoast Angelica (*Angelica lucida*).

The remaining 40% of the territory included mesic areas characterized by shorter (0.5–1.0 m) grasses and sedges. This habitat was not as dense and was less botanically diverse than the taller habitat type. Much of this area was dominated by reedgrass, but several patches of shorter sedge (*Carex* sp.) marsh were also present. The nesting habitat used by Lanceolated Warblers at Buldir was apparently similar to that used in Asia (Dementiev and Gladkov 1954).

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