

# Short Communications

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## Confirmation of Nesting in Mexico for Four Bird Species from the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, Baja California

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**ABSTRACT.**—We document nesting of Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*), Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*), and Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir of northern Baja California. These species are relatively widespread in the mountains of southern California. Additional species recently observed in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir in summer remain as unconfirmed breeders in Baja California [Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) and Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)] or all of Mexico [Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*)]. Received 3 March 1997, accepted 3 Oct. 1997.

The highlands of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir in northern Baja California received scant ornithological coverage prior to completion of the road to the National Observatory in the 1970s. The observatory is at the summit of the eastern escarpment, at an elevation of approximately 2800 m. Richard E. Webster, Wurster, and others have made at least seven spring and summer visits to these remote mountains since 1984. Among the many significant observations accumulated in this interval are records of seven species previously unknown from Baja California in summer: Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*), Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*), Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*), and Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*). Excepting the owl and solitaire, which are resident in mainland Mexico, none of these species was known to nest anywhere in Mexico prior to these observations (AOU 1983, Wilbur 1987,

Phillips 1991, Kratter 1992); all are known to winter in Mexico. Howell and Webb (1992, 1995) suggested that the flycatcher, thrush, and towhee probably breed in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, but were unable to confirm nesting. We provide documentation of nesting for these three species and Fox Sparrow.

Of the other species, Erickson et al. (1994) discussed the initial saw-whet owl record (subsequently, up to three were heard along the La Tasajera road in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir 28–29 May 1994; Wurster, Kurt and Cindy Radamaker, pers. obs.); Webster and Wurster observed a Townsend's Solitaire near the National Observatory on 3 July 1987; and we observed a single male Hermit Warbler on 5 July 1993 in white fir (*Abies concolor*) forest near the National Observatory, but it did not appear to be mated.

Plant taxonomy follows Wiggins (1980).

### SPECIES ACCOUNTS

*Dusky Flycatcher* (*Empidonax oberholseri*).—This species breeds in the mountains of southern California as far south as the Laguna Mountains of San Diego County, at least sporadically (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984, Kratter 1992). Webster (pers. comm.) first found two pairs in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir in an aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) grove about 2 km southeast of the National Observatory at 2700 m on 30 June 1984 and 1–2 singing birds were found there and at other aspen groves nearby in 1987 and 1991 (Howell and Webb 1992). Webster (pers. comm.) first confirmed nesting on 5 July 1992, when four birds he saw included one carrying food.

On 5 July 1993, we found three Dusky Flycatchers (one singing) at the above mentioned aspen grove, and four on the La Tasajera road nearby. Among the latter birds were two adults feeding young in a nest about 5–6 m

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up in a lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) approximately 2 km south of the main park road at an elevation of about 2600 m. The nest sat atop a horizontal branch about 2 m out from the trunk, and considerable aspen material appeared to have been used in its construction. We observed the adults bringing food to the nest several times, but were unable to see the number or condition of young. The nest tree was part of a mixed coniferous forest of lodgepole pine, white fir, and Jeffrey pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*) in the vicinity of a meadow system and an aspen grove.

More than 20 singing, and apparently territorial, Dusky Flycatchers were observed by Wurster and K. and C. Rademaker on 29 May 1994. They were present in virtually every grove of aspen, pine, and fir lining the La Tasajera road, which meanders across the meadows of the main plateau from the observatory road south toward the La Tasajera divide.

*Hermit Thrush* (*Catharus guttatus*).—In southern California, this species breeds south to the San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountains, with occasional summer records south to the mountains of San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984, Kratter 1992). In the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, up to five singing Hermit Thrushes were observed in June or July of 1984, 1986, 1987, 1991, and 1993 (Howell and Webb 1992, pers. obs.). They were near the National Observatory, primarily on north-facing slopes dominated by white fir and bordering the aspen grove at 2700 m. Nesting was confirmed on 5 July 1992 when Webster (pers. comm.) observed four birds in the same area, including one adult carrying food and one recently fledged young. Field notes by Webster and Wurster describe these birds as relatively large and pale for the species, characteristics of the mountain group of subspecies including *C. g. sequoiensis* of the Sierra Nevada and southern California.

*Green-tailed Towhee* (*Pipilo chlorurus*).—This species is a rather wide spread breeder in montane southern California, including San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984, Kratter 1992). Wurster first observed a singing male at La Corona de Arriba (km 84 on the main park road, elevation 2600 m) on 4 July 1987. Howell and Webb (1992) observed four towhees (two singing birds and another pair act-

ing agitated, as if near a nest) at 2700 m in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir on 16 June 1991.

Wurster observed a single Green-tailed Towhee at the aspen grove near the National Observatory on 5 July 1993 and we found at least two birds at La Corona de Arriba. A singing bird on 4 July 1993 was followed by two birds on 6 July, one of which was an obvious locally reared juvenile (still in streaked plumage) well seen by Alan D. Barron. The habitat where these birds were seen consisted of small meadow openings among mixed coniferous forest dominated by white fir, Jeffrey pine, lodgepole pine, and sugar pine (*Pinus lambertiana*). Meadow vegetation included lupine (*Lupinus* sp.), bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), and snow berry (*Symphoricarpos oregonophilus*). Bracken is an important component of the nesting habitat at Cuyamaca Peak in San Diego County (P. Unitt, pers. comm.).

*Fox Sparrow* (*Passerella iliaca*).—This is a widespread breeder in montane southern California, including San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984, Kratter 1992). Webster (pers. comm.) first found this species in the vicinity of La Corona de Arriba on 3 July 1992 (one *P. i. stephensi*-like individual; no evidence of breeding).

We observed six Fox Sparrows (three singing males) in the same area on 5–6 July 1993 and obtained evidence of nesting for two pairs on 6 July. The plumage and structure of all birds appeared to match *P. i. stephensi*, the breeding subspecies throughout southern California. One obvious juvenile followed an adult male and foraged on the ground between scattered brush. Another pair, over 1 km away, included a female carrying food, scolding, and driving a dusky chipmunk (*Eutamias obscurus*) from the area. We searched in vain for the nest or young of this pair. The forest habitat in these areas was similar to that described for the towhees above, but was drier and considerably more open, with only scattered trees. More significant was the different shrub layer. Fox Sparrow habitat was dominated by manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.) and snow bush (*Ceanothus cordulatus*) up to 2 m high with open ground in between.

These Fox Sparrows were accomplished vocal mimics. One male routinely incorporated Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus cooperi*) song phrases into the opening of its song,

while the song most often given by another was essentially a copy of the song of Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*). This imitation was close enough to our ears that we originally misidentified the song to species.

#### DISCUSSION

All of these nesting species were found in habitat with vegetation structure similar to that found in their typical breeding habitat in the mountains of southern California. Suitable habitat may occur in very limited patches in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir. For example, all of our observations of summer Hermit Thrushes come from a single small stand of mature white fir on a steep north-facing slope along the high eastern escarpment. There is an abundance of downed timber and scattered shrubs in the ground layer. The ground layer in other fir dominated areas is much more open. Suitable habitat for Green-tailed Towhees and Fox Sparrows is also limited. Open forest with sufficient brushy understory is apparently restricted to a narrow band paralleling, and immediately east of, the range's lower western escarpment. In contrast, Dusky Flycatcher habitat is extensive and includes all the aspen groves and numerous islands of mixed aspen, lodgepole pine, and fir lining the edges of the extensive central plateau meadow system.

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## Greater Prairie-Chickens Displaying in Tree on Lek

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ABSTRACT.—I describe 23 observations of 4 Greater Prairie-chicken males displaying from a tree in eastern Kansas. This was observed on a lek located in predominantly native tallgrass prairie containing a few scattered trees. Received 24 May 1997, accepted 5 Aug. 1997.

Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) leks are generally on high

prairie with grass cover that is relatively short compared with surrounding vegetation (Yeater 1943; Schwartz 1944, 1945; Schroeder and Braun 1992). Leks are in open country with wide vistas (Hamerstrom et al. 1957). Displays are typically performed on the ground but have been performed on blinds and other raised positions (Schwartz 1945, Hamerstrom and Hamerstrom 1973). This note describes prairie chickens displaying in a tree.

The observed lek was in native tallgrass

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