

Short Notes

Zonotrichia sparrows with yellow faces — On 27 February 1998, while birding at the White Slough State Wildlife Area near Lodi, San Joaquin County, TM spotted and pointed out an odd-looking Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) foraging on the ground of a levee bordering White Slough. The bird not only had the yellow crown typical of the species, but the area around the eye, between the eye and the bill, and the entire throat and chin were yellow as well. WH then claimed to see the same bird, but said it was an adult White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) with a yellow face! We quickly realized we had one of each species foraging within a few feet of each other, both with unusual amounts of yellow color on their faces.

Initial thoughts that the Golden-crowned Sparrow might have an unusual amount of yellow pigment in the feathers of the head seemed immediately unlikely given the nearby presence of a similarly-marked individual of another species, so we looked for some possible environmental source of the color. An obvious feature appeared to be the catkins of a willow, identified by WH as *Salix lasiolepis*, growing along the slough. Touching the catkins left a “stain” of yellow pollen on our fingers, and presumably would stain feathers similarly. However, we did not see any sparrows actually feeding on these catkins.

Three or four times over the past ten years, in February and March, WH has seen, at his Stockton residence, either Golden-crowned or White crowned sparrows with yellow coloration on their faces. At first, he also thought unusual feather pigmentation might be involved, but with very close views through a spotting scope could see that it was instead a dusting of something yellow on their faces and bills.

We found one literature reference that offers support for the theory that willow pollen is responsible for this phenomenon. B. B. DeWolfe (in Bent et al., U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 237:1307, 1968) wrote: “Nuttall’s sparrows I collected west of Guadalupe, Calif., in February 1957 had the feathers about the base of the bill bright yellow with willow pollen. At College, Alaska, I saw Gambel’s sparrows eating staminate willow catkins and the new leaf buds of willow . . .”

The willow species that is most likely responsible for observations of yellow-faced sparrows in California in late winter is *S. lasiolepis*, as it flowers earlier than other species of willows in this area and the inflorescence appears before the leaves. It is the only willow in flower on the February dates when the yellow-faced phenomenon was observed.

Other species of willow may produce the phenomenon. TM recently (6 April 2000) handled a Golden-crowned Sparrow during banding operations at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento County, that had a yellow-stained bill. Material scraped from the bird’s bill closely resembled yellow pollen on the staminate catkins of nearby leafed-out willows. These willows were not identified to species, but *S. lasiolepis* is typically finished flowering by this date.

This note is presented in part as a cautionary tale. Observers might be

tempted to identify odd-looking *Zonotrichia* sparrows with unusual amounts of yellow color on the face as possible hybrids (e.g., of *Z. leucophrys* X *Z. atricapilla*). In addition, observers should be aware that other bird species might feed on willow catkins and be similarly "stained."

Thanks to Michael Brady and Stan Wright for access to banding operations at Stone Lakes NWR. — *Waldo Holt, 3900 River Drive, Stockton, CA 95204* and *Tim Manolis, 808 El Encino Way, Sacramento, CA 95864.*

An Orange-crowned Warbler banded in Sacramento County is found in Alaska— The Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District, cooperating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), is involved in a bird-banding project at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (SLNWR), Sacramento County to monitor bird populations and the presence of avian viruses of public health concern within these populations. On 7 May 1999, SW netted and banded a female Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) in cottonwood-willow woodland just south of North Stone Lake and east of the Stone Lake Slough. The bird weighed 9 g and had no visible subcutaneous fat reserves. Wing chord was 58 mm and the rectrices were moderately worn. There was no sign of a brood patch or cloacal protuberance.

Less than a month later, on 6 June, the warbler flew into the window of Shana Loshbaugh's home in Kasilov, Alaska, on the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage. Shana brought the stunned bird inside, whereupon she discovered the band. Using the internet webpage for USFWS, she reported the band number to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. After a short time, the warbler recovered from its mishap and was released to continue its travels.

The area around Kasilov is rural with large tracts of undeveloped land. The landscape consists of rolling flatlands with more mountainous terrain 50 miles away. The dominant vegetation is spruce forests with open patches of developed areas and wetlands. Other native trees in the area include birch, alder, willow, poplar and cottonwood. There is a small lake within a quarter mile. The site is three miles from Cook Inlet and about two miles from the edge of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

The straight line flight distance for this Orange-crowned Warbler from SLNWR to SL's home on the Kenai Peninsula is approximately 2,000 miles. We cannot know how long the warbler stayed on SLNWR before continuing its trek north or how many other rest stops it took along the way, but to arrive in Alaska on 6 June it needed to average 67 miles a day for 30 days. An amazing accomplishment by any standard for a bird weighing 9 g. Bent (U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 203:97, 1953) reports a similar band return, of an Orange-crowned Warbler banded at Eagle Rock (Los Angeles County) on 3 April 1940 and found dead at Wards Cove, Alaska, on 21 June 1940.

Thanks to Shana Loshbaugh for providing information about the Kasilov area and her finding of this particular Orange-crowned Warbler. — *Stan Wright, Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District, 8631 Bond Road, Elk Grove, CA 95624.*