

A Lucy's Warbler reaches the Central Valley

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On the morning of 18 April 2000, while birding at the Stockton Rural Cemetery in downtown Stockton, San Joaquin County, I found a singing male Lucy's Warbler (*Vermivora luciae*). The weather was extremely pleasant with calm, clear skies, which probably accounted for it being a relatively quiet morning from a birding standpoint. This cemetery (perhaps 4 hectares in extent) is full of mature trees and shrubs, including many Valley Oaks (*Quercus lobata*), and is one of the better spots in downtown Stockton for spring migrants.

Shortly after arriving at about 1100 I heard a warbler singing in the distance. Outside of a few Yellow-rumped (*Dendroica coronata*) and Black-throated Gray (*Dendroica nigrescens*) warblers, it was the only singing bird I could hear. From a distance it sounded just like a Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*) to my ears. I decided to get a look at the bird with the hopes other birds would be in its company. As I got closer to the bird I perceived a difference in its song from that of a typical Nashville. The bird was high up in a Valley Oak. I could see its form in the canopy but could not see it directly. The bird sang only about once every 45 seconds. The rather rich song was a high trill followed by a series of lower "chips." In particular, the low "chip" notes were different in quality from what I was used to hearing from a Nashville. I "pished" at the bird and fortunately it responded. It approached to within 6 m of me and perched on a bare branch for about 30 seconds.

My first impression upon seeing the bird was that it was the dullest Nashville Warbler I had ever seen. I wondered if it was perhaps albinistic. Then came views of the crown and rump, and I realized I had a most remarkable bird, a Lucy's Warbler.

Description: A very small warbler in all regards: bill, head, body, tail. Head and upper parts were a light gray. The face area was slightly paler except for the auricular area, which was more similar to the crown. This formed a very slight face pattern giving the bird a very odd looking supercilium as well as a very odd looking blank-faced appearance. I couldn't detect an eye ring. The wings were a darker gray than the upper parts with light grayish edges to the wing coverts that formed very slight wing bars. The tail was likewise a slightly darker gray than the upper parts. The entire under parts were a creamy white. The crown had a rusty patch. Likewise, the entire rump area was a similar rust color. The bird was very active and flicked its tail from side to side. In addition to the song, I heard the bird call several times, a sharp "chink" that reminded me of a Virginia's Warbler (*Vermivora virginiae*).

This was not only the first record of Lucy's Warbler for the Central Valley, but apparently the first interior record and very possibly the first true spring record for northern California.

Lucy's Warbler is a bird of the desert Southwest, where its breeding range coincides with the presence of mesquite (*Prosopis*). The species breeds from southern Utah, southern Nevada, and southeastern California, south through Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, western Texas, and northwestern Mexico; it winters in western Mexico (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In California the species historically bred almost exclusively along the Colorado River, where it was common, as well as a few additional desert sites to the west in Imperial, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Over the past 50 years it has declined as a breeder in the Colorado River Valley due to the felling of mesquite woodland and other riparian associations (Dunn and Garrett 1997). However, a slight expansion in its breeding range has been noted with nesting records west to Thousand Palm Oasis, Riverside County and Morongo Valley, San Bernardino County, and north to Tecopa and Furnace Creek Ranch, Inyo County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Howard Cogswell, pers. comm).

The species is very rarely noted on migration, but is known as a fall/winter vagrant to the coast. Since the 1960s it has been an annual rarity to the coast of southern California north to San Luis Obispo County. In northern California there were but about a dozen records through 1980 (mostly in Monterey County during fall/winter), but during the past 20 years it has occurred almost annually with 50+ records compiled in that period along the coast from Monterey to Humboldt counties (Howard Cogswell, pers. comm.). All of these records have been during fall/winter. Individuals at the Carmel River mouth, Monterey County, 6 March 1977 and near the Pilarcitos Creek mouth, San Mateo County, 4-6 March 1992 may have been early spring migrants, but such dates would be early even along the Colorado River. Farther to the north, there is but one record for coastal Oregon: one bird along the North Fork of the Siuslaw River, Lane County, 27 December 1986–24 January 1987 (Gilligan *et. al* 1994).

In the interior of southern California there have been some 25 vagrant records of Lucy's Warbler. Of interest with regards to the San Joaquin County record, there have been at least five spring/summer records for Kern County (including a nesting pair with young near Weldon along the South Fork of the Kern River 27 July 1991), and at least one bird present at Oasis in extreme southeastern Mono County for five successive springs 1984-88 (Howard Cogswell, pers. comm.).

Thanks to Howard Cogswell for supplying information on all records of Lucy's Warbler in California that have appeared in *North American Birds* (published by the American Birding Association), as well as in its predecessors, *American Birds* and *Audubon Field Notes* (published by the National Audubon Society), up to 2000.

LITERATURE CITED

Dunn, J. and K. Garrett. 1997. *A Field Guide To Warblers of North America*. Houghton Mifflin, NY.

Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution*. Los Angeles Audubon Society, Los Angeles, CA.

Gilligan, J., M. Smith, D. Rogers, and A. Contreras. 1994. *Birds of Oregon: Status and Distribution*. Cinclus Publications, McMinnville, OR.

Grinnell, J., and A. Miller. 1944. *The Distribution of the Birds of California*. Cooper Ornithological Club, Berkeley, CA.

Notes

Reappearance of Vermilion Flycatchers in Kings County – A pair of Vermilion Flycatchers (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) have returned to a section of cottonwood and willow snags on the grounds of the Lemoore Sportsman's Club, north of Elgin Avenue, Kings County. The female was first seen on 14 February 2002 (by Jeff Seay), while the male was first seen on 17 February 2002 (by Mark Stacy). The birds are apparently the same two found at this site from January-March 2001 (Cole et al., CVBC Bulletin 4:33-36, 2001). Of all previous Central Valley records of this species, none have involved birds returning in subsequent years.

In addition to these birds, I am now aware of two other reports for the Central Valley, both from Kern County, not included in Cole et al. (loc. cit.) and not previously published. Chris Geyer found a first-year male at a City of Bakersfield groundwater recharge area on 18 October 1998, and Allison Sheehey photographed the bird on 19 October 1998 (AS, pers. comm.). A month later on 15 November 1998 AS found and photographed a first-year male with "more red" plumage, which she suspected to be the same bird, at the Kern National Wildlife Refuge. She was later informed by the refuge staff that the bird was present "through March" 1999 (AS, pers. comm.). My thanks to AS for sharing details and photographs of the Kern County records. — *Luke Cole, 561 Hill Street, San Francisco, CA 94114.*