

A first record of Black Turnstone for Butte County

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While visiting my parents over the last several years from my home in Washington state, I became friends with some of the local Butte County birders, including Richard Redmond and Mike Skram. Through them, and since I was born and raised in Chico, I became interested in keeping a Butte County bird list. On 15 August 2002 this urge led MS and me, envisioning thousands of shorebirds, out into the Butte County lowlands in search of partially-flooded rice fields.

We began our adventure to the area near Nelson where three days earlier RR and I had found a Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), a bird MS needed for his list. He was not disappointed as he was able to get close views of the bird along a diked road. Not satisfied and wanting more, we headed to a favorite of Butte County birders, Grainland Road. At the corner of Grainland Road and Seven Mile Lane, a perfect field was found. We began slowly working our way around the muddy field, scoping the mixed flocks of shorebirds.

During this hot, mid-afternoon walk we encountered a dozen shorebird species and were feeling good about it. As we were finishing our last leg around the field and agreeing that our best bird was a Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*), I spotted a bird that caught my attention. I



Figure 1. Black Turnstone (*Arenaria melanocephala*) along Grainland Road, Butte County, on 15 August 2002.
photo by Robert Flores

stopped walking and raised my binoculars up to clearly view a Black Turnstone (*Arenaria melanocephala*) working its way along the moist soil edge and turning over dirt clods. It was slightly smaller than the Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) and slightly larger than the Pectoral Sandpipers (*Calidris melanotos*) with which it was foraging. The bird was noticeable due to its black-and-white appearance and short-legged look. That look reminded one of a ground-foraging dove as it held its body parallel with and low to the ground. I said "Black Turnstone" to MS as he froze and repeated my two words. As I attempted to point out the bird to my companion, he was already stating that it was not on the county list. After getting good looks, we then began to note those field marks that set apart this bird from others.

The bill was dark, the outer half of the lower mandible angled sharply to the tip. The upper mandible had a slight curve upward from the base to the tip. Its head was uniform chocolate brown. A light tan line began in front of and above the dark eye and extended well behind the eye. This eye line was thin in front of the eye and thicker behind it. Its neck, upper back, and upper chest were chocolate brown like the head and looked uniform from a distance, but at close range very thin tan edges could be seen on the feathers. This was difficult to see without good light and close viewing distance. The bird did show a white spot in front of the bend in the wing. The secondaries, primaries and scapulars were the same chocolate brown color except the light tan feather edges were bolder than on the other areas described above. The white wing stripe was barely noticeable in some views of the walking bird. The lower chest, belly, and undertail coverts were white.

I decided to get closer in order to get better photos (Figure 1). As I approached the bird several times to within 15 m, it finally had enough of me and flew out into the field, showing off the striking black-and-white flight pattern. We were afforded great looks at the white in the wings, back, and tail.

Fifteen minutes or more had elapsed since we first saw the bird and MS felt we needed to report it to others, so we retreated to a pay phone at nearby Dayton Four Corners. Not finding anyone at home, we drove to Chico and from there contacted several Chico birders who had looks at the bird before sunset. Although I was happy to find the first Butte County record of a Black Turnstone, I was even more satisfied that Richard Redmond was among those individuals who had the opportunity to see the bird.

Yee (2002) recently summarized records of the Black Turnstone in the Central Valley, and in fact briefly mentioned this sighting, but he was unaware at the time of the documentation presented here.

LITERATURE CITED

Yee, D. 2002. A Black Turnstone in San Joaquin County. CVBC Bulletin 5:59-60.