

General Field Notes

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General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items. Submit manuscripts to the appropriate state editor.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

First Documented Record of the Green-tailed Towhee in North Carolina

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While participating on the Southport, NC, Christmas Bird Count on 5 January 2002, Greg Massey discovered a Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) in a thicket along a little-traveled paved road northeast of that town. The towhee was seen by many observers during the remainder of the winter. It was last noted on 24 April, by Massey (Davis 2002).

The bird was often difficult to observe, spending much time in dense evergreen hedgerows. Fortunately, it also spent considerable time in a weedy field, where it sometimes could be seen from the road as it fed on the ground beneath the dead weed stalks. In fact, some birders placed bird seed on the ground in a small cleared area under the weeds, for easier viewing from the road and for increasing the odds that the bird would have enough food to survive the entire winter.

The bird was easily identified once a clear view was obtained. It was a large sparrow-shaped bird, slightly larger than the associated White-crowned (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) and White-throated (*Z. albicollis*) Sparrows. It was slightly smaller than a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*). The very simple color pattern consisted of a bright rusty/rufous crown; a bright white throat that contrasted with medium gray underparts; and olive-colored back,

wings, and tail. The white throat was bordered on each side by an obvious dark malar stripe. The bill was finch-like – thick but not long; its color was a darkish-horn color. The leg color was a dull pink or dull gray.

The bird fed by scratching the ground with two feet simultaneously, as does the Eastern Towhee (*P. erythrophthalmus*). It was occasionally seen to quickly scoot across the ground, almost mouse-like. The bird gave call notes mostly early in the morning, seemingly before it began feeding. The call was a distinctive “meew” that rose and descended, a bit similar to the Gray Catbird’s call, which, however, does not descend at the end.



Figure 1. Green-tailed Towhee near Southport, NC, 1 Feb 2002. Photo by Van Atkins

The North Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted written descriptions by the author and by John Buckman. It was also photographically documented by several birders. The Committee accepted photos taken by Harry Sell; Van Atkins (Fig. 1) and Steve Shultz also provided photos of the bird to be viewed on various websites. As a result of the photo documentation, the species was placed on the Official List (North Carolina Bird Records Committee 2003). This is the second Green-tailed Towhee reported in North Carolina. However, a description of a bird reported in *American Birds* (30:53) at Bodie Island in Dare County on 28 November 1975 has never surfaced. Neither the current records committee nor earlier ones were able to find written details, and thus that report was considered as an Unaccepted Sighting in 1990 (North Carolina Bird Records Committee 1990).

The Green-tailed Towhee is a reasonably common breeding bird in the western United States. It inhabits chaparral, open woods, thickets, and other brushy cover on mountainsides, usually in dry habitats. It is migratory, such that the bulk of the population moves south to winter from southern

California east to central Texas and south into Mexico. Not surprisingly, the species has turned up occasionally in much of the eastern seaboard, and it has been reported from nearly all of the states in the region (Sibley 2000), including South Carolina (Post and Gauthreaux 1989; South Carolina Bird Records Committee 2002). In fact, based on the range map in Sibley (2000), North Carolina was one of the last states in the East to definitively add Green-tailed Towhee to its state bird list.

Literature Cited

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