

STATUS OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT IN THE CRESTON VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1968-2006

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The Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) is a large, colourful, and secretive warbler with an affinity for undisturbed dense tangles, thickets, and shrublands usually in close proximity to water (Dunn and Garrett 1997). Two populations have been defined in North America, an eastern form (*I. v. virens*) and a western form (*I. v. auricollis*) (Eckerle and Thompson 2001). The latter subspecies occurs in British Columbia where it has been reported from widely scattered locations in the south-central interior, the lower Fraser River valley, and on Vancouver Island. It breeds locally only in the lower Fraser River valley, Okanagan valley, and Creston valley (Campbell et al. 2001) and recently the Pend d'Oreille River (Dulisse et al. 2005).

The Yellow-breasted Chat occurs regularly only in the Okanagan valley where it is considered a “fairly common summer resident at low altitudes” (Cannings et al. 1987). Outside the Okanagan valley the species has only been recorded with some regularity in the Creston valley (Van Damme 2002) and the upper Fraser River valley (Campbell et al. 2001) on the south coast. The purpose of this note is to summarize historic and current records for the Creston valley and clarify and present new information on its breeding status.

Munro (1950, 1958), in his treatise on birds in the Creston region, documented the occurrence of nine warbler species without mention of the Yellow-breasted Chat. The earliest published reference to chats in the Creston valley was provided by Butler et al. (1986) who listed the species as “Casual” with the following additional comments “Most sightings in West Creston. First sighting in May, No nesting record. Latest sighting 22 August.” Specific details for the statements were lacking.

Table 1 lists records extracted from ornithological

Table 1. Occurrence and breeding records for the Yellow-breasted Chat in the Creston valley, BC, 1968-2005.

Year	Date	Location	Comments
1968	9 Jun-4 Aug	Duck Lake	1+ male singing
1969	4 Jul	Six Mile Slough	1 male singing
1971	1 Jul	Creston	1 male singing
1974	20 Jun	Duck Lake Road	1 male singing
1978	25 May	Old Kootenay River channel	1 male singing
1982	11 Jul	Wildlife Interpretation Centre	1 male singing
1982	22 Aug	Old Kootenay River channel	1 male singing
1984	12 Jul	Duck Lake, north end	fledged young
1988	26 Jun	Six Mile Slough	1 male singing
1990	21 Jun	Creston	1 male singing
1993	22 Jun	Duck Lake, along dyke	1 male singing
1993	2 Aug	Lower Kootenay Indian Reserve	fledged young
1995	31 May	Summit Creek	1 male singing
2000	May	Six Mile Slough	1 male displaying
2001	5 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male singing
2002	30 May	Duck Lake, north end	1 male singing
2005	27 May	Summit Creek	1 male detected
2005	13 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male & female detected
2005	14 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male detected
2005	16 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male detected
2005	16 Jun	Summit Creek	1 female detected
2005	20 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male & female detected
2005	23 Jun	Summit Creek	1 male detected
2006	21 May	West Creston	1 male singing

databases in the Wildlife Data Centre housed by the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies in Victoria. Much of the new information has been extracted from historical field notes, surveys by biologists (Machmer and Ogle 2006), unpublished reports (Cannings 1995, Cannings 2000, Environment Canada 2006), and naturalists visiting the valley for birdwatching excursions and submitting their sightings to the Wildlife Data Centre.

The Yellow-breasted Chat was first recorded in the Creston valley in 1968 during a survey of colonial fish-eating birds by biologists in the Kootenay River

valley. On 9 June, a loud, unidentified song was heard coming from dense shrub tangles at Duck Lake. In July, the songster was finally seen and identified, as a male Yellow-breasted Chat. It was last recorded on 4 August. There may have been two males present as a chat was heard at several locations around the lake during the summer.

Over the next 38 years the Yellow-breasted Chat has been recorded in at least 15 additional years from 10 different locations within the Creston valley. Most of these sites are remote and not easily accessible to biologists and birdwatchers. For example, chats

found along Six Mile Slough were heard from a boat and those at the north end of Duck Lake require travelling the length of the dyke to the railway bridge. Lands in the Lower Kootenay Indian Reserve provide suitable habitat for chats and have not been thoroughly explored, as permission is required to enter.

As might be expected, most records are of males singing. There are two breeding records and only a few records of a female being detected (Table 1). All but one record are from dense patches of riparian shrubs (Figures 1 and 2) that include dominant stands of red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*), ocean spray (*Holodiscus discolor*), willow (*Salix* sp.), saskatoon (*Amelanchiar alnifolia*), red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*), and Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*). Tall wetland grasses often form the understory. In 2006 a male was heard “giving full repertoire” on a dry mountain slope along West Creston Road with ocean spray, mallow ninebark (*Physocarpus malvaceus*), mock-orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*) and common snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) being the dominant vegetation.

The Yellow-breasted Chat has been recorded in the Creston valley over a 63-day period from 21 May through 22 August (Table 1). The full breeding period extends from 15 June to 2 August with calculated dates of 19 June to 21 July for eggs and 4 to 31 July for nestlings (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Nest location and habitat of the Yellow-breasted Chat showing dense riparian shrubs and marsh grasses with maturing black cottonwoods at the north end of Duck Lake, BC. 12 June 2006 (Linda M. Van Damme).

There are two breeding records for the Creston valley, both of fledged young observed by the senior author. Campbell et al. (2001) list the first record although they overlooked adding the “red dot” to represent breeding because the record was discovered too close to the publishing deadline. On 12 July 1984, two recently fledged young were watched being fed by adult chats in a willow shrub within one foot of their nest. The bulky-looking nest was composed of grasses and plant stems and was built among stems of willow shrubs about 0.4 m above water. The habitat surrounding the nest site was covered in tall grasses.

The second family was discovered in the Lower Kootenay Indian Reserve on 2 August 1993 (Table 1). Two young, estimated at two days fledged, were being fed by an adult in a dense patch of ocean spray, red elderberry, Nootka rose, and willow. Over the 15 minutes they were observed the family remained in the dense growth moving to the interior for more protection. Later the area was searched for a nest without success.

The Yellow-breasted Chat has occurred in at least 16 (41%) of the 39 years records have been regularly maintained in the Creston valley, and on average the species has been reported every 2.4 years. All but one of the records is from the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area.

Recently Dulisse et al. (2005) reported a Yellow-breasted Chat nest with eggs near Waneta, in the



Figure 2. Typical dense shrub tangles where recently fledged Yellow-breasted Chat young have been observed being fed by adults. Along Highway 21 near the Indian Lands, Creston, BC. 16 May 2006 (Linda M. Van Damme).

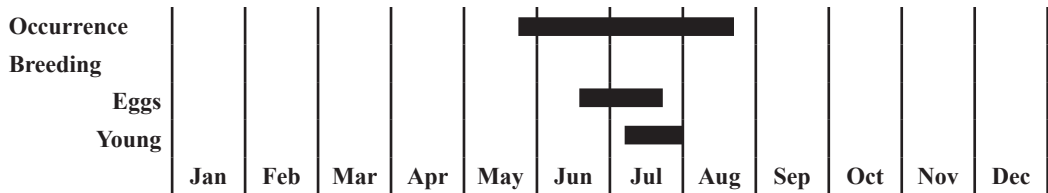


Figure 3. Annual chronology of the Yellow-breasted Chat in the Creston valley, BC.

lower Pend d'Oreille River valley, 75 km west of the Creston valley. That constitutes the third published breeding record in the interior of British Columbia outside the chat's known range in the Okanagan valley.

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Individuals with an asterisk (*) are deceased but have left a legacy of information in their field notebooks that are in the library holdings of the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies in Victoria.

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About the Author

Although retired, Ed is active fulltime in volunteer activities that include nature interpretation, wildlife observation, and guiding hikes. He also writes a nature/wildlife column for the local Creston newspaper under the heading “*Out There*” in which he alerted local residents of the first occurrence of the Pinyon Jay for British Columbia. Professionally Ed worked as a biologist and wildlife interpreter with the Canadian Wildlife Service as well as a science educator on the junior high school level and in the landscape/gardening industry. He has been enjoying some aspects of a forced retirement for 10 years and actively fosters outdoor experience.