

## A COASTAL BREEDING RECORD FOR THE YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT IN MISSION, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) is currently the only New World warbler listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (2006) as being threatened in British Columbia. Its breeding range in the province is commonly described as being restricted to the southern Okanagan and Similkameen valleys where perhaps fewer than 50 pairs breed annually (Cannings 1995). Recently, however, the Yellow-

breasted Chat has been found breeding in the Creston valley, and near Waneta, in the extreme southern portion of the West Kootenay region of southeastern British Columbia (Dulisse et al. 2005, Campbell and McMackin 2006). What is not commonly known is that a pair of Yellow-breasted Chats bred at Mission, in the central Fraser River valley, British Columbia, in the mid-1960s.

Details of the Yellow-breasted Chat's occurrence at Mission in 1966 and 1967 were recorded at the time but were misplaced when I loaned my field notes to the Royal British Columbia Museum in 1979 for use in *The Birds of British Columbia* (see Campbell et al. 2001). Fortunately, very recently, R. W. Campbell was able to locate photocopies for some of the rare passerines which included details of the discovery of the chat nesting.

A Yellow-breasted Chat was first discovered on 25 May 1966 in a patch of regenerating red alder (*Alnus rubra*) saplings and Himalayan blackberries (*Rubus discolor*). The location was about 0.3 km from the west end of Fraser Crescent Road in Mission across from my parents' house (# 32481) where I lived at the time as a grade 10 student. The general habitat consisted of dense riparian thickets of Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*), willow (*Salix* sp.), red alder, Douglas maple (*Acer glabrum*), blue elderberry (*Sambucus caerulea*), and other shrubs that resembled typical breeding habitat (Campbell et al. 2001). My mother and I heard a bird singing loudly from this large thicket all night in late May, 1966. Although I first thought the nocturnal singer was probably a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*), sometime in very early June I spotted the bird perched halfway up a red alder sapling along the edge of the blackberry canes. This bird was faithful to his song perch, and though it sang from other parts of the thickets, it could often be seen in the same sapling, its yellow breast contrasting against the dark green of the background.

As June passed it became apparent that two Yellow-breasted Chats occupied the thicket because I could hear notes simultaneously coming from two different locations in the thicket. Nocturnal singing peaked in early June and became infrequent thereafter.

On 30 July, at 1000 hr, after hearing a loud single note which I transcribed as "shack", I investigated

the thicket and almost immediately saw an adult Yellow-breasted Chat. It was close and moving through the branches near the source of the call note. However, the adult was silent and slipped away as I found a single Yellow-breasted Chat chick out of the nest, calling this loud location note. The chick was perched in the blackberries and alders about 1.25 m from the ground. The fledgling possessed only the stubby beginnings of tail feathers. The coloured corners of its gape were still noticeable and a wisp of down grew above each eye. The chick was brown on its upper parts and gray on its underparts. Clearly it had fledged recently, perhaps within the last 2-3 days. The two adult chats reappeared and hopped silently through the undergrowth toward the chick. One of them called. In response, the chick immediately joined one of the adults and vanished into the brush while the other adult perched briefly in the sapling above me.

By 1130 hr I had relocated the fledged young in willows along Windebank Creek about 25 m south of Fraser Crescent Road. I was able to approach so closely that I attempted to hand-capture it but it fluttered out of reach back toward the thicket where I had first seen it.

That evening, with the help of birder friend Ron Fryer, we concluded that two fledged chicks were calling simultaneously at the site. We located the two birds, one on the north edge of a patch of young alders and the other on the south side but didn't disturb them further. Call notes were heard for a week thereafter and an adult was occasionally seen around the thickets into mid-August.

The 1966 breeding record is very briefly noted by Campbell et al. (2001; pages 166 and 168). What is not generally known is that a pair of Yellow-breasted Chats appeared in the same thickets from May to August 1967. The records of observations from that summer are still misplaced. I suspect a pair nested again in 1967, but as I recall, I was not home much and did not make the effort to record any breeding activity. During the breeding season of 1968 no chats could be found at the site.

It was a case of amazing coincidence that a pair of Yellow-breasted Chats, at best very rare and local in the Fraser River valley, nested in habitat nearby one of only three or four birdwatchers living in Mission at the time.

This suggests to me that at least occasionally other chats probably nested in the Fraser River valley and went undetected by birdwatchers and ornithologists.

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#### *About the Author*

Chris has been an active British Columbia birder since 1962 when he was a Grade 7 student in Mission. Now retired from teaching, he participates in bird surveys and inventories for various agencies, consultants, and non-profit groups. He currently serves as a Director for the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies.