



First Record of Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) for British Columbia

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Two distinct subspecies of Willet (*Tringa* [*Catoptrophorus*] *semipalmata*; Figure 1) are recognized, *T. s. semipalmatus* (Eastern Willet) and *T. s. inornatus* (Western Willet). The former breeds mainly along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Newfoundland to Tamaulipas, Mexico and winters in eastern South America. Western Willet breeds in interior prairies from southern Alberta and Manitoba to northern California and Colorado and winters primarily along the Pacific coast of North America south to South America (Chile) (Lowther et al. 2001, O'Brien 2006). Even though it cannot be assumed that Willets occurring in British Columbia are *T. s. inornatus*, O'Brien (2006) presents persuasive details for identification of the two subspecies.

The earliest mention of "Western" Willet in British Columbia is by Fannin (1898, p. 29) who stated,

"Taken at Clover Point, Victoria, August 18th, by Mr. J. Henley." The species was not listed in Fannin's earlier check list of British Columbia birds that included 307 species (Fannin 1891). The specimen could not be located in any North American museum collections, including the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now Royal BC Museum), where Fannin was its first curator (Campbell et al. 1990a).

The record was repeated by Brooks and Swarth (1925, p. 44) with the caveat:

No trace of this specimen (if it was preserved) is now to be found, and from the evidence of Mr. F. Kermode [who succeeded Fannin as curator] it may be advisable, if no further records turn up, to remove this species to the hypothetical list.



Figure 1. When foraging and resting Willet (left), in non-breeding adult plumage, appears as a large and rather plain grayish shorebird with short gray legs. It may be confused with Greater Yellowlegs (right), with which it associates, but the Willet is larger, has a bulkier body, and longer bill and lacks long yellow legs. Photos by R. Wayne Campbell.

Munro and Cowan (1947, p. 241) removed Willet to their hypothetical list stating:

Included in a previous list of the birds of British Columbia [Brooks and Swarth 1925] on the basis of one bird reported to have been shot near Victoria, August 18, 1898 [Fannin 1898]. Nothing in the literature suggests that Fannin or any other ornithologist examined the bird. The nearest point of normal range is southern Alberta.

Campbell et al. (1990b, p. 146) did not accept the record. The province's first record of "Western" Willet was published by Clay (1946, p. 13):

The Western Willet (Catoptrophorus semipalmatus inornatus) is sufficiently rare on our Pacific shores to justify the following observation. I had a clear view of fifty willets on April 29, 1945, from the shore of the Oak Bay golf links at Victoria, B.C. The time was 11 a.m., about the time of an earth tremor here, and a storm was brewing. The sea in front was a heavy blue-black, with the sun shining from behind me and upon the sea. A number of waders piped as the willets approached. Three bands of eight, twenty-five, and seventeen, respectively, passed a little off-shore,

flying fast and calling, slipping in their flight to right and to left. The plumage was distinctive, the broad white band across the dark wing being unmistakable. [Figure 2]

The record was discounted at the time (see Campbell et al. 1990b) but (Davidson 1966, p. 9) accepted it for his mimeographed publication *An Annotated List of Birds of Southern Vancouver Island*.

The record was also accepted by Campbell et al. (1990b, p. 146) partly because J.O. Clay was an experienced observer who was one of the few naturalists at the time who published his sightings. These totaled 25 articles, including peer-reviewed journals like *Canadian Field-Naturalist* and *Murrelet*, between 1946 and 1959 (see Campbell et al. 1979, 1988). Paulson (1993, p. 163) also accepted the record.

While living in Kelowna, in the Okanagan valley, from April 1942 to June 1946 (see Campbell and Henderson 2013), Glenn R. Ryder and his brother Donald recorded "Western" Willets on four occasions, two of which are first records for British Columbia and all are earliest occurrences for the interior of the province. Details, reproduced verbatim from Glenn's notes, follow.

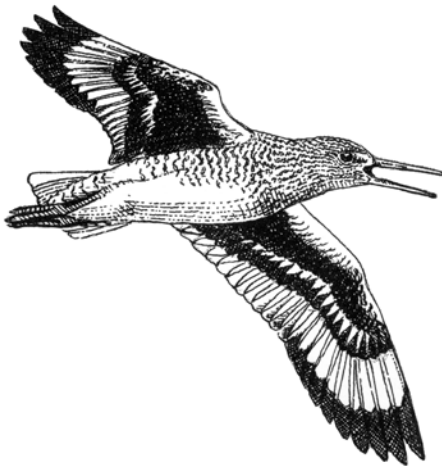


Figure 2. The unique and distinctive large black on white on black wing stripe of the Willet, in breeding (left) and nonbreeding plumage (right) is diagnostic. *Drawing courtesy of N. John Schmidt. Permission to reproduce the artwork was obtained from Birds of North America Online <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna>, maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Photo is by Alan D. Wilson.*

May 6, 1944 – Kelowna (Knox Mountain) – *Western Willet* (*My first record in Area*). (1) a lone Bird was seen at the Bigger Pond [Kathleen Lake] on Knox Mountain (11U 322457E 5531050N; el. 498 m) about the size of a Greater Yellowlegs But with a Bigger Bill bluish legs and when flying shows Black and white markings on wings. [see Figure 2] Bird out of Its normal range.

Kathleen Lake is about 220 m long and 88 m wide and covers an area of two hectares. Glenn visited Kathleen Lake and the pond atop “Knox Mountain” eight more times before he saw another “Western” Willet in Kelowna. However, he recorded other shorebirds feeding at the ponds on May 10 (2 – Lesser Yellowlegs [*Tringa flavipes*], 1 – Stilt Sandpiper [*Calidris himantopus*], and 3 – Red-necked Phalarope [*Phalaropus lobatus*]); May 20 (2 – Spotted Sandpiper [*Actitis macularius*], 3 – Pectoral Sandpiper [*Calidris melanotos*], Stilt Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher [*Limnodromus scolopaceus*], and 1 – Red-necked Phalarope); June 14 (no shorebirds); July 1 (no shorebirds); July 12 (1 – Solitary Sandpiper [*Tringa solitaria*], 2 – Spotted Sandpiper, 30 – Least Sandpiper [*Calidris minutilla*], and 2 – Wilson’s Phalarope [*Phalaropus tricolor*]); August 20 (2 – Solitary Sandpiper and 2 – Red-necked Phalarope); August 27 (5 – Solitary Sandpiper, 4 – Spotted Sandpiper, 3 – Wilson’s Snipe [*Gallinago delicata*], and 2 – Red-necked Phalarope); and September 9 (2 – Solitary Sandpiper, 7 – Spotted Sandpiper, and 12 – Red-necked Phalarope).

The Knox Mountain record is the first for British Columbia and predates the earlier record (e.g., Victoria, April 29, 1945) by almost a year. The previous earliest occurrence in the interior was also at Kelowna where a bird was present on 13 to September 1973 (Cannings et al. 1987 [p. 169], Campbell et al. 1990b [p. 146]).

In autumn, 1944, Glenn and Donald recorded another “Western” Willet in Kelowna, this time on the beach of Okanagan Lake.

September 16, 1944 – Kelowna (Mission Creek) – (1) Lone Bird seen on Beach along the Big Bay south of Mission Creek area [11U 320973E 5523590N; el. 342 m] in flight outer wing feathers show Black white and Black.

The only other shorebirds on the beach in the immediate vicinity of the “Western” Willet were 6 – Semipalmated Plovers (*Charadrius semipalmatus*), 6 – Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), and 3 – Spotted Sandpipers.

September 9, 1945 – Kelowna (Manhattan Beach) – (1) seen at the Bay north of Manhattan Point [11U 320411E 5530563N; el. 343 m] with other shorebirds.

Other shorebirds on the same beach included: 12 – Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*), 4 – American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*), 11 – Killdeer, 2 – Greater Yellowlegs, 3 – Lesser Yellowlegs, 3 – Spotted Sandpipers, and 4 – Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*).

April 24, 1946 – Kelowna (Poplar Point) – (1) Bird seen North of Poplar Point [11U 320756E 5531763N; el. 343 m] along the beach seemed to key out as this species [Willet] white belly with gray Brown above Barred feathers neck area Crescent shaped marked feathers, a small white spot at upper throat below Bill. Wings Black on outer wing with a white band of feathers running down the wings length. As this Bird did its wing stretching I could see these same colours on under sides. Legs gray looking. As the Bird flew off North up the beach Its calls were heard a whistled “Pill-will-willet.”... This willet is a Bit larger than a Greater Yellow-legs and with a thicker bill. I had watched this Bird for about 15 minutes before it left area.

The two spring dates in the central Okanagan valley fall within those reported for southern Alberta, which is about the same latitude as Kelowna. Sadler and Myres (1976) give a median arrival date of 2 May (range 24 April to 5 May, $n = 9$ years). Cannings et al. (1987, p. 169) list only two records reported through 1986 in the Okanagan valley: single Willets were seen at Kelowna on 13 September 1973 and north of Osoyoos Lake on 4 May 1985. The nearest point of normal breeding range is the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in southwestern Alberta, 380 km east of Kelowna (Semenchuk 1992; p.122). †

Acknowledgements

The late Glenn Ryder's early observations continue to fill in historical gaps in our knowledge of bird occurrences in British Columbia. Decades before the author inherited his extensive field notes in 2013 (see Campbell and Henderson 2013), a promise was made to Glenn to safeguard his life's work and assure him, as time permitted the records would be published and made more widely available.

I am grateful to N. John Schmidt for use of the drawing originally published in Lowther et al. (2001) and to Barry Bermudez, Marketing Manager, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, for permission to reproduce it. The photograph of the Willet in flight was willingly provided by Alan D. Wilson.

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About the Author

Wayne is lead author of the four-volume set *The Birds of British Columbia* (1990–2001).