Extralimital Winter Records of the Black-chinned Sparrow

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ABSTRACT

Black-chinned Sparrows (*Spizella atrogularis*) are rarely found in winter much beyond their typical non-breeding range. Therefore, the Black-chinned Sparrow that spent the fall/winter of 2015-16 in Yolo County, California was remarkable. To put this record into perspective, I reviewed all available confirmed reports of extralimital winter Black-chinned Sparrows available from American Birds/North American Birds, Christmas Bird Counts, eBird, and various state rare bird committee reports. Based on these records, the Yolo wintering bird was the first found in winter in the Central Valley and the second winter record for Northern California. It was also the second most northerly winter record in California by 3.8° latitude (over 440 km) and further north than any winter record outside of California by over 3° latitude (over 330 km).

The Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*) winters through much of Mexico, including Baja California Sur, and into the southern portions of Arizona and New Mexico and western Texas. Two of the subspecies (*S. a. evura* and *cana*) move north to breed, occurring from southwestern Texas, through southern New Mexico, much of Arizona, southwestern Utah, and southern Nevada, and from Baja California well into California (Tenney 1997, Sibley 2014). The species stages intermittent breeding season irruptions into northern California (Tenney 1997, Pandolfino et al. 2022). A handful of breeding season observations have been made as far north as northwestern Oregon (www.oregonbirding.org/oregon-bird-records-committee/) and west-central Colorado (Maynard 2011).

Despite this sparrow's substantial migratory range, extralimital records, especially in winter, are rare (Tenney 1997). Thus, the Black-chinned Sparrow found by Mark Sawyer (and seen and photographed by many) during the fall/winter of 2015-16 in Yolo County, California (Sterling 2017) was unexpected. This location is far from the normal winter range of the species (approximately 900 km and >4° latitude north of that range). To put this record into its proper historical perspective, I reviewed all the available data on confirmed winter records of the Black-chinned Sparrow north of its normal winter range (extralimital occurrence).

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METHODS

To identify winter (December–February) records of Black-chinned Sparrows observed beyond their normal winter range, I examined data from the publications American Birds and North American Birds (www.aba.org/north-american-birds/ and www.sora.unm.edu/node/209), confirmed eBird records (eBird Basic Dataset 2023), Christmas Bird Counts (CBC; National Audubon Society 2020). Undocumented records were assessed using data from the Oregon (www.oregonbirding.org/oregon-bird-records-committee/), Colorado (www.cobrc.org/Reports/), and Pennsylvania (www.pabirds.org/records/index.php/pennsylvania-bird-list/) rare bird records committee reports. Where published documentation was lacking, I contacted local experts (e.g., North American Bird Regional Editors, eBird Regional Editors, CBC compilers) to determine if those records could be substantiated.

I created the expected winter range in the southwestern U.S. was based on data from confirmed eBird records since 2000 (Fink et al 2022). I drew the range limit to include areas where the Black-chinned Sparrow was reported in most or all winters from 2010 through 2021. Note that this winter range based on eBird reports extends further north into Arizona and New Mexico than that shown in the published range maps of Tenney (1995), Sibley (2014), and Dunn and Alderfer (2017).

In cases where a bird was reported from the same location in the same season by multiple observers, I treated the records as a single record.

RESULTS

On 30 September 2015, Mark Sawyer was at Babel Slough in eastern Yolo County, California, just west of Sacramento, when he came across an odd-looking sparrow that he photographed and identified as a Black-chinned Sparrow. Over the next 11 days, many other birders observed and photographed this individual. The bird was not seen again until it was re-found (the same individual based on patterns of retained and replaced feathering) by Mark Sawyer at the same location on 14 January 2016, where it remained until at least 27 February 2016.

Within the U.S. states that include portions of the normal winter range of the Black-chinned Sparrow (Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas; Figure 1), 1% (17 of 1352) of all observations were beyond the expected range (Table 1). I found no confirmed winter records in other U.S. states, except for California. In addition, the Mexican state of Baja California (north of the normal winter range within Baja California Sur) had extralimital records (Figure 1). The only Northern California record prior to the Yolo County observation was of an immature male in Ukiah, Mendocino County Jan-Mar 1975 (Stallcup and Winter 1975). The Yolo County bird was nearly 4° north of the next most

northerly California record (Santa Barbara County), and more than 3° north of any other winter record (Figure 1).

CBC data from the late 1960s through the 1980s included six extraordinary records (two in California and one each in Pennsylvania, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona) none of which was documented and all of which were presumed to be errors in data entry or misidentifications.

Table 1. Winter (December-February) records of the Black-chinned Sparrow in the U.S. and Baja California including extralimital records. Data from eBird (eBird Basic Dataset 2023), supplemented with data from McCaskie and Garrett (2016) and Lehman et al. (2023).

	All Winter Records	Extralimital Winter Records
Arizona	996	6 (1%)
New Mexico	193	11 (6%)
Texas	163	0 (0%)
California	20	20 (100%)
Baja California	8	8 (100%)

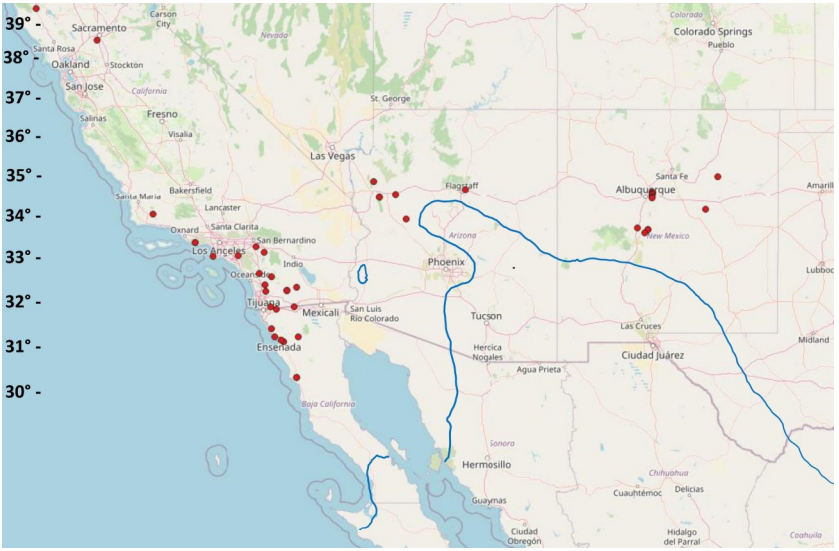

Figure 1. All confirmed winter records of the Black-chinned Sparrow beyond the normal winter range. The blue line shows the approximate northern limit of the winter range (based on eBird data compiled by Fink et al. 2022).

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