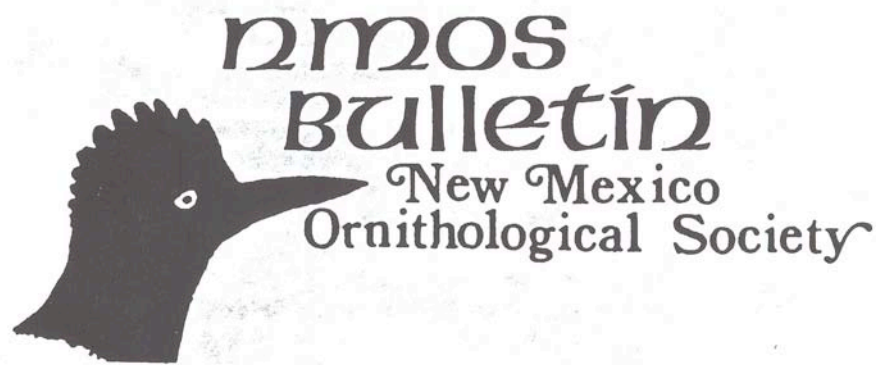


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Volume 22 1994 Number 1

OBSERVATIONS ON THE WHITE-EARED HUMMINGBIRD IN NEW MEXICO

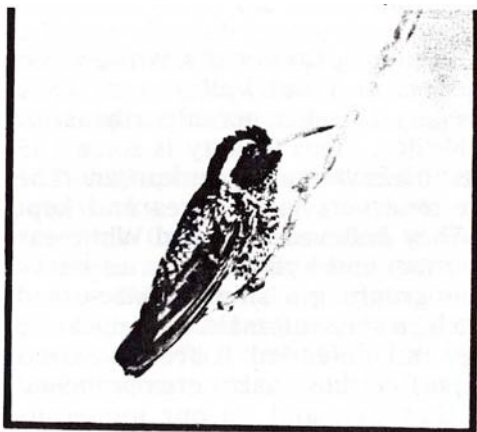
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The White-eared Hummingbird (*Hylocharis leucotis*) has been known in New Mexico only since 1973, when R. R. Johnson reported seeing a male near Aspen (Turkey) Spring in the Animas Mountains on 16 or 17 June (Hubbard 1977: 46). Roger Mongold and R. Halley reported (without details) a male at the Aspen Spring cattle trough on 20 July 1974 (notes in NM Natural Heritage Program). There is little reason to doubt either of these reports, although neither is supported by any tangible evidence. The first positive record was that of Hubbard (loc. cit. and NMOS 1976: 24) who referred to a female collected near Aspen Spring (United States National Museum), plus three males seen and another bird heard, all presumably by Hubbard, in upper Bear Canyon on 13 and 14 July 1976.

Apparently no further reports have come from the Animas Mountains. Hubbard (1978: 39) treated the species as "casual in summer" in that range, "rare and very local in evergreen and riparian woodland at middle elevations." The White-eared Hummingbird is one of the unmarked species in Hubbard's (1987: 57) list of Animas Mountains birds, indicating either a non-breeder or species of uncertain status.

Somewhere in the eastern Peloncillo Mountains, (probably Clanton Canyon), Rick Wilt reported seeing a female White-eared Hummingbird 11 June 1979 (NMOS 1979: 33), but no documentation supports this report. More certain was another, 13 years later and also from the Peloncillos, as Robert T. Scholes observed an



Adult male White-eared Hummingbird, Grant County, NM, 6 Aug 1993. Photo by Dale and Marian Zimmerman.

adult male, from a distance of four feet, at his hummingbird feeder in Post Office Canyon, 6 July 1992 (Scholes, pers. comm., 13 Aug. 1993). The bird was seen only that day, and was clearly a vagrant or transient individual.

A few miles farther north, and west of the New Mexico-Arizona state line, White-eared Hummingbirds rarely and irregularly appear at feeders located in and near Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains, at dates ranging from 7 June to 15 September (Taylor 1993: 13; S. Spofford, pers. comm.). In southeastern Arizona, the species is generally considered to be a "sparse summer visitant" to the Chiricahua, Huachuca, and Santa Catalina mountains. (Monson and Phillips 1981: 86). Davis and Russell (1990: 101) elevated the bird's status to "uncommon" and included (without details) Madera Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, in its Arizona range. They indicate presumably accepted records from early April to October, with isolated records in March and December. Presumably the more extreme dates refer to the Huachuca Mountains (especially Ramsey Canyon) from which there are now several late autumn to early spring records (S. Williamson, pers. comm.)

On 9 July 1993, David and Anne Seymour discovered a White-eared Hummingbird visiting their feeders at Trout Valley, near Lake Roberts in the Gila National Forest, c. 17 miles north-northeast of Silver City, Grant County, New Mexico. This locality is some 135 miles north of the site of Scholes' observation a year earlier. The Seymours kindly notified other observers in the

area and kept careful watch at their feeders. They believed a second White-ear might be present. Marian Zimmerman and I visited the area on 14 July, repeatedly seeing and photographing a single White-eared Hummingbird which we judged to be a subadult male. It visited one feeder throughout the morning and defended it from favored perches on a diagonal feeder-support cord or nearby tree branches. Other hummers at the feeders that day, and on our numerous subsequent visits in July and August, were Rufous (*Selasphorus rufus*), Broad-tailed (*S. platycercus*), Calliope (*Stellula caliope*), Magnificent (*Eugenes fulgens*), and Black-chinned (*Archilochus alexandri*). A Blue-throated Hummingbird (*Lampornis clemenciae*), appeared at intervals throughout the observation period, but not on a daily basis.

The Seymours' rural residence is at the base of an extensive dry ridge with scattered pines, junipers and oaks, and c. 80 yards from shrubby riparian vegetation along Sapello Creek. The hummingbird feeders are on or adjacent to the house under tall ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) beneath which numerous spreading junipers (*Juniperus scopulorum* and *J. deppeana*), 20-25 feet tall, provide an understory. The house is situated on a shaded lawn among these trees. Elevation at the site is almost exactly 6000 feet.

On 20 July, shortly after my arrival at 0900, I watched the White-ear fly from a feeder to a dead juniper twig about 10 feet from me. To my astonishment it alighted only inches from a second, somewhat duller plumaged, White-eared Hummingbird. The birds soon sped away, but for the remainder of the morning both were much in evidence, sometimes together. One showed no iridescent blue or purple on forehead, chin or throat, and much less green on the breast and sides which were diffusely spotted green and gray. The two hummers were easily distinguished in flight by small grayish outer rectrix tips readily visible on the spread tail of the duller individual. Rectrices of the brighter bird were entirely dark. Although its extensive blue and purple head feathers proclaimed it a male, I was uncertain about the duller individual whose plumage suggested an adult or subadult female or an immature male. I suspected the latter from its bright coral-red bill (broadly tipped dusky), plus its apparent singing (from concealed perches, preventing verification; the brighter bird had been singing regularly).

I photographed both individuals on various dates during the next few weeks. On 18 August, while I was present, William A. and Lorene L. Calder mist-netted, banded and photographed the duller White-ear which, after examination in the hand, we determined to be a juvenile male. The brighter male, then in nearly full adult

plumage, avoided capture during the period of the Calders' banding operations which extended to 20 August, although it and the banded juvenile continued to visit the feeders.

On 29 August, the Seymours saw the adult bird several times, but did not observe the juvenile. On this date, Kendall and David Clark closely observed two White-eared Hummingbirds at their porch feeder and adjacent blooming snapdragon plants in Pinos Altos, six miles north of Silver City and astride the Continental Divide at 7000 feet. This site is c. 12 air miles south of the Seymours' residence. Both White-ears were seen together, at times perched inches apart on the feeder located just outside a window. One appeared to be an adult male, the other a presumed juvenile or adult female. Both were present on 30 August and (one bird) 31 August on which dates at least the adult male was still visiting the Trout Valley feeders. Although 1000 feet higher than Trout Valley, in modified pinyon pine-juniper-oak vegetation, the Clarks' feeders attracted the same hummingbird species in approximately the same proportions, except for a few more Magnificents (up to five) and two Anna's Hummingbirds (*Calypte anna*), a species not yet recorded in Trout Valley despite years of hummingbird feeding by the Seymours and others.

I visited the Clark residence at Pinos Altos on 1 September, observing and photographing a juvenile White-eared Hummingbird several times during the morning. Its plumage was comparable to that of the duller bird at Trout Valley at the time of its initial appearance on the Seymours' property. I briefly glimpsed a probable second White-ear at flowers near the Clarks' feeders but I did not see two together. However, as the juvenile (whose bare tarsi were observed as it repeatedly perched five feet from me) was clearly not the bird banded on 18 August, and as the Clarks and Seymours observed an adult male at their respective feeders throughout 30 and 31 August, four White-eared Hummingbirds (three of which I photographed) were present in the region on these dates. Anne Seymour last observed the male White-ear at Trout Valley on 1 September. Kendall Clark saw two together in Pinos Altos on 18 and 19 September; neither was in adult plumage. Their last observation, of a single bird, was on 3 October, by which time numbers of other hummingbird species (except Magnificent and Anna's) had greatly diminished in the area. (Anna's was present until at least 11 October, and three Magnificents into at least late December.)

I wish to express my thanks to the Seymours and the Clarks for allowing me repeated and unlimited access to their property, for catering to my photographic and recording needs, and for sharing

their own important observations with me. Robert Scholes, Sally Spofford and Sheri Williamson kindly supplied details of their White-eared Hummingbird observations in southeastern Arizona.

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Received 17 November, 1993

COUCH'S KINGBIRD IN NEW MEXICO

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In the period 23 November (not September, as stated in Hubbard 1986a) through 5 December 1985 (Hubbard 1986b), a putative Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*) was present at the Bosque

del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, Socorro County, New Mexico. This identification was based on the recording by one of us (JWS) of this bird's so-called "breerer" call, which reportedly distinguishes this species from the very similar-appearing Tropical Kingbird (*T. melancholicus*) (e.g., Scott 1987; Zimmer 1985). In addition to two "breerer" calls, the bird continuously uttered "pit" or "pit-pit" notes as it perched on the tops of shrubs and low trees, from which it made occasional sallies for flying insects. After analysis of the recording, we conclude that this bird was indeed a Couch's Kingbird.

Couch's Kingbird is a species of the Atlantic slope of southern North America, ranging from southernmost Texas to Belize and Guatemala (A.O.U. 1983:472). By contrast, the Tropical Kingbird ranges from southern Arizona, San Luis Potosi, and Tamaulipas southward to central Peru and Argentina (A.O.U. 1983). Although described as a separate species in the nineteenth century (A.O.U. 1983), recent taxonomists generally considered the two taxa as conspecific until Smith (1966) demonstrated that they are vocally divergent and have overlapping ranges. More recently, Traylor (1979) documented the existence of trenchant morphological differences between the two, especially as regards bill length and wing formulae. In addition, he better delineated their area of overlap in Mexico and identified a limited area of hybridization there (i.e., in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec). Based on his study and the work of Smith, the A.O.U. (op. cit.) now treats these two taxa as separate species.

Smith (1966) showed that the vocalizations of *couchii* are lower pitched and comprised of notes and calls that are longer in duration and span a greater range of frequencies than those in *melancholicus*. By contrast, he characterized the vocalizations of the latter as "composed mostly of very brief, high pitched, thin sounding elements repeated in rapid succession." In quantitative terms, his sonograms illustrate these differences very well. For example, our measurements show the maximum duration of individual vocal elements (figures on the sonogram) as being up to 0.8 sec in *couchii* vs. no more than 0.15 sec in *melancholicus*. In addition, the minimum frequency of vocalizations of *couchii* is about 1.55 kHz compared to 3.35 kHz in *melancholicus*. Finally, the maximum range in frequencies for any given figure in *couchii* is 5.85 kHz vs. 2.7 kHz in *melancholicus*.

Although many people can hear differences as described above, distinguishing among them may require a variety of approaches. For example, to distinguish two vocalizations that differ mainly in pitch, most of us must hear both at about the same time.

However, such comparisons are not always possible, which can lead to uncertainty as to whether a given vocalization is higher or lower in pitch than another (this is especially true in cases where differences are not extreme). On the other hand, unique vocal elements may distinguish taxa to the extent that one has only to hear such vocalizations to confirm identification, like the "breerer" call of Couch's Kingbird. However, even in these cases, direct comparisons are still valuable, and they are essential when seeking definitive identifications.

What we assume to be the "breerer" call of Couch's Kingbird (Fig. 1) is rendered by Smith (1966) variously as "tzheer" (number of e's variable) and "tzheeeeerrhhh," and this vocalization was used in several behavioral contexts that we will not attempt to detail here. Our measurements of Smith's sonograms show duration to vary from 0.125 to 0.60 sec, with minimum frequencies of 1.65 to 3.96 kHz. Whether or not all versions of this figure are indeed homologous, they share the common trait of containing distinct oscillations in frequencies, almost to the point of being trilled. This quality is reflected in descriptions of this call by other authors, such as "gereeeeeer" (Kincaid in Peterson and Chalif 1973) and "whee-ee-rr-r" or "ti-peer" (Edwards 1989). By comparison, what may be homologous calls in the Tropical Kingbird consist of figures that are harsh rather than trilled, shorter in duration (<0.20 sec), and higher in minimum frequency (>3.35 kHz), as measured from Smith's sonograms. Furthermore, this species lacks any vocalization that might be mistaken for the "breerer" figure in couchii.

A sonogram of the "breerer" call of the putative Couch's Kingbird from New Mexico, shown in Fig. 1, has a duration of 0.5 sec and minimum frequencies of 2.0 to 3.0 kHz. A sample of the same vocalization from a known couchii has a duration of 0.5 sec and minimum frequencies from 1.9 to 2.9 kHz. By comparison, typical calls of the Tropical Kingbird have a duration of 0.05 to 0.20 sec and minimum frequencies 3.10 to 4.45 kHz. We believe that the sonogram of the New Mexico kingbird clearly identifies it as couchii, based on the presence, duration, and minimum frequencies of its "breerer" call. The tape recording was made at 1045 hours on 26 November 1985, lasts 80 sec, and is number 1985-47Q in the New Mexico Ornithological Society Photo/Tape File (NMOSPT). The sonograms were made by John William Hardy at the Florida State Museum. The recordings of T. melancholicus and couchii from Mexico are from Coffey and Coffey (1989). Hardy also concurred in the assignment of the New Mexico bird to couchii (pers. comm.).

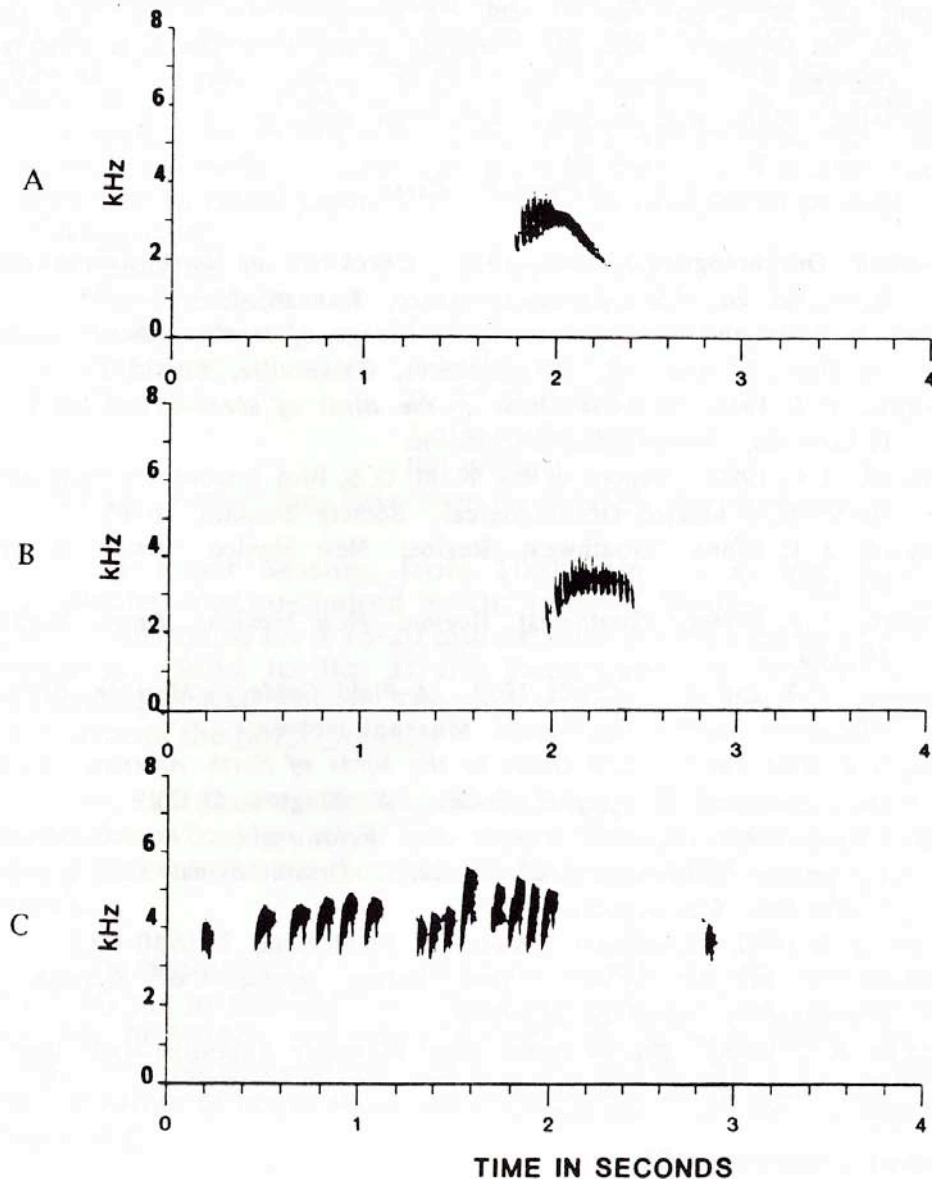


Figure 1. Sonograms of kingbird vocalizations: A. The “breer” call of Couch’s Kingbird (Mexico); B. The “breer” call of a putative Couch’s Kingbird from New Mexico C. Typical vocalizations of the Tropical Kingbird (Mexico).

The New Mexico bird is also documented by a series of seventeen 35-mm color slides (NMOSPT Nos. 1985-47A-P) taken by one of us (JWS) on 26-27 November 1985. These clearly show the bird to be a member of the *couchii/melancholicus* complex, but they do not permit its identification to species.

The above record is the first for New Mexico of Couch's Kingbird and apparently the westernmost confirmed for the species (e.g., A.O.U. 1983). We know of only one previous record of a kingbird

of the *Tyrannus couchii/melancholicus* complex from New Mexico--a bird photographed (NMOSPT Nos. 1980-36A-F) by Joseph Schatz, Jr. (also seen by Joyce R. Schatz and Robert W. Scholes) and present at Rodeo, Hidalgo County on 14-21 December 1980 (Hubbard 1982:47). Because no information is available on the vocalizations of this bird, its identification to species is not possible. Another kingbird of the *couchii/melancholicus* complex, reported from Anthony, Doña Ana County, New Mexico (Snider 1970:631), was actually in Texas. It was seen on 25 April 1970 by Mary Belle Keefer, Lena McBee, and Carolyn McClintock near Anthony in El Paso County according to Steve West (pers. comm.).

Acknowledgements

We thank John William Hardy of the Florida State Museum for making the sonograms for us and his identification of the bird in question as *Tyrannus couchii*. We are grateful to James R. Travis and anonymous reviewers for reading earlier versions of this manuscript, which was improved with their review.

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Received 1 November 1993

1994 ANNUAL MEETING UPDATE

As announced in the last issue of the NMOS Bulletin the 1994 Annual Meeting of New Mexico Ornithological Society will be held Saturday 5 March at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science. A registration fee of \$5 will be collected, with speakers and students exempt. Registration will begin at 8:30 am and continue until noon. The business meeting, which will include election of officers for 1994-96, is scheduled for 9:00-9:45 am. The nominating committee (J. David Ligon, Greg Farley, and Pat Stein) presents the following slate:

President: Dr. James F-Travis
Vice-President: Mary Alice Root
Secretary: Paul Steel
Treasurer: Ross Teuber
Directors: Dr. W. Burton Lewis
 Jackie McConachie
 Bill Willard

No further nominations have been received by the Secretary.

The Paper Session, from 10:00 am - 4:30 pm, will be coordinated and co-chaired by Dr. James S. Findley and Dr. Buck Cully. Abstracts, for a 15-20 minute talk, will be accepted until 31 January. Send to Jim at the Department of Biology, UNM, Albuquerque, NM 87131. The abstracts are to be published in the next issue of the NMOS Bulletin.

Dr. Rick Smartt, Chairman of the Science Division and Curator of Invertebrate Zoology at the New Mexico Museum of

Natural History and Science, will give the opening address of the morning paper session.

The banquet (\$15, use enclosed reservation form) is scheduled for 7:00 pm at the Old Town Sheraton. At 8:15 pm the Invited speaker, Ro Wauer, will give a presentation at the Museum. Ro is a former New Mexico resident and member of the NMOS, and a noted nature author of books about Mexico, Big Bend National Park, and the Southwest.

Two field trips are scheduled for Sunday morning: to the Petroglyph State Park and to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

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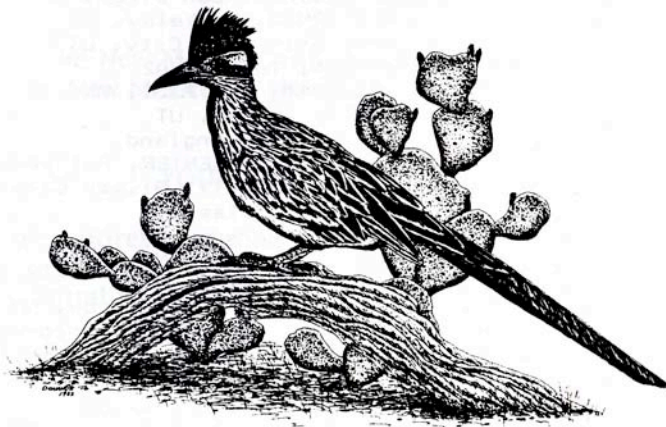
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