FEATURED PHOTO

HAS THE BLACK-CAPPED GNATCATCHER OCCURRED IN BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR?

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On 7 November 2011, Daniel Galindo and I were walking along the west side of the pond at Posada La Poza in Todos Santos, Baja California Sur. It was about 90 minutes before sunset, and passerines were quite active. In an area of dense low scrub bordering the beach, we encountered a mixed foraging flock consisting largely of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila caerulea*). From the flock, we heard several times a thin mewing call reminiscent of the California Gnatcatcher (*P. californica*). Eager to photograph California Gnatcatchers, I pursued what I thought was the calling bird, taking several high-quality photographs before the flock dispersed into the surrounding countryside.

Later examination of the photographs revealed a gnatcatcher with extensively pale undersides to the rectrices, as seen in the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Black-capped Gnatcatcher (*P. nigriceps*) but not the California Gnatcatcher. The bird I photographed, however, had a number of marks less consistent with the Blue-gray and more consistent with the Black-capped (see this issue's back cover), a species unrecorded and unexpected on the Baja California peninsula. This photograph shows most of the important features that suggest the Black-capped: tail morphology, narrow and nearly broken eye-ring, and a large bill.

The most intriguing mark is the tail structure. Easily visible is a large gap between r5 and r6 (the shortest visible rectrix and the next shortest), which is typical of the Black-capped Gnatcatcher but not of any other gnatcatcher occurring in the United States or northwestern Mexico (Dunn and Garrett 1987, Pyle 1997, Sibley 2000). Another feature consistent with the Black-capped Gnatcatcher is the bill, which appears long and thick, a mark often noted for distinguishing the Blue-gray and Black-capped Gnatcatchers (Dunn and Garrett 1987, Howell and Webb 1995, Sibley 2000, Alderfer 2006). Furthermore, the bill was mostly black, excepting a dull grayish base to the lower mandible, more consistent with the Black-capped than the Blue-gray (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000, Atwood and Lerman 2006). The thin eye-ring and brownish-gray upperparts are additional traits suggesting the Black-capped (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Sibley 2000). This suite of characteristics should eliminate the Blue-gray as well as the California and Black-tailed (*P. melanura*) Gnatcatchers, the other gnatcatchers that inhabit the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico (Dunn and Garrett 1987, Howell and Webb 1995, Sibley 2000, Alderfer 2006).

The Black-capped Gnatcatcher breeds predominantly on Mexico's Pacific slope from Colima to Sonora (Howell and Webb 1995). It has occurred sporadically in southeastern Arizona since 1971 (Monson and Phillips 1981), but a distinct range expansion into that region started around 2003 (Stevenson and Rosenberg 2004, 2009), including Guadalupe Canyon in extreme southwestern New Mexico, where the species has been found since 2005 (Williams 2006, 2009). Notably, in northern Sonora the Black-capped Gnatcatcher may be migratory (Russell and Monson 1998), and most records from Arizona are from spring and summer (Alderfer 2006). Species with expanding populations generate more vagrants than those whose distribution is static (Newton 2003), and this is especially true for migratory species (Vinicombe and Cottridge 1996, Veit 2000). Though the Black-capped Gnatcatcher's range is spreading to the north, the species is not clearly migratory and has no pattern of long-distance vagrancy (A.O.U. 1998). Among experts familiar with gnatcatcher

identification, W. Russell, R. Hoyer, and S. Finnegan (pers. comm.) considered the photographs essentially diagnostic; J. Atwood considered them strongly suggestive. Conversely, S. N. G. Howell (pers. comm.) suggests that in southern Baja California the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher may have a larger bill than in the U.S. Philip Unitt (pers. comm.) measured 10 males from Baja California Sur and 30 males from southern California, southern Nevada, and Arizona in the San Diego Natural History Museum. The differences in bill length (Baja California Sur, mean 9.19, range 8.5–10.3, standard deviation 0.57; U.S., mean 8.82, range 8.2–9.5, standard deviation 0.30) and bill depth (Baja California Sur mean 2.21, range 1.9–2.6, standard deviation 0.22; U.S., mean 2.07, range 1.8–2.4, standard deviation 0.13) are slight though significant (bill length, $t = 2.65$, $P = 0.012$; bill depth, $t = 2.41$, $P = 0.020$). Grinnell (1926), in distinguishing the Blue-gray Gnatcatchers of southern Baja California from those of the western U.S. as subspecies, also wrote that the bill of the birds of the western U.S. is "slightly slenderer." But the principal difference by which he distinguished subspecies *amoenissima* of the western U.S. from *obscura* of southern Baja California was the longer tail of the former, and Phillips (1991) considered even that inadequate to define the subspecies.

However, given that the bird at Todos Santos was not actually identified in the field and the "mewing" call may not have come from the bird photographed (I would not have distinguished between common call notes of California and Black-capped Gnatcatchers), none felt that the identification of Black-capped Gnatcatcher could be made at the necessary level of certainty.

The habitat around Posada La Poza includes dense thorn scrub and ruderal vegetation around agricultural areas, not dissimilar to the habitat this species inhabits in Sonora and Sinaloa (Atwood 1988, Atwood and Lerman 2006). The possibility of a small resident population merits further exploration.

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"Featured Photo" by © Steven G. Mlodinow of Longmont, Colorado: A bird with characteristics of the Black-capped Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila nigriceps*) at Todos Santos, Baja California Sur, 7 November 2010.