FIRST RECORD OF THE SLATE-THROATED REDSTART FOR CALIFORNIA

DOMINIK MOSUR, 2407 29th Ave., San Francisco, California 94116; dominikmosur@gmail.com

MARTIN FREELAND, 327 Campus Drive #205 (Dirzo Laboratory), Stanford, California 94305; martinf3@stanford.edu

ABSTRACT: We detail the occurrence of a Slate-throated Redstart (*Myioborus miniatus*) in an urban park in San Francisco from 29 July to 16 September 2024, establishing the first record for California and the northernmost for the species. The bird showed characters of the northern subspecies, *M. m. miniatus*. It may have reached this site as a late spring overshoot or possibly via a molt migration. This represents the 47th species of wood-warbler (Parulidae) recorded in California, and—remarkably—the 46th for San Francisco County.

On 29 July 2024 Mosur discovered a Slate-throated Redstart *(Myioborus miniatus*) at Pine Lake Park in San Francisco, San Francisco County, California. Following unanimous acceptance by the California Bird Records Committee, it represents a first record for California and the northernmost record in the world (Benson et al. 2025). It also represents the 47th species of wood-warbler (Parulidae) recorded in California, and—remarkably—the 46th for San Francisco County. The redstart remained at Pine Lake for 50 consecutive days, always within approximately 200 meters of the original location of discovery, before it was last observed on 16 September. It foraged primarily by gleaning in arroyo willows (*Salix lasiolepis*) and was occasionally seen feeding in Tasmanian blue gums (*Eucalyptus globulus*).

The Slate-throated Redstart appeared as a small and very active warbler, mostly blackish in color with vivid red underparts, a reddish crown, and extensive white tips to the outer rectrices (Figures 1–3). The lack of white arcs below the eyes and lack of white patches in the wings ruled out the Painted Redstart (*Myioborus pictus*). The call note was also different from the robust, finch-like calls of the Painted, sounding to us more akin to the call of an Orange-crowned Warbler (*Leiothlypis celata*).

Pine Lake is a 12-hectare city park that people from the surrounding neighborhood frequent primarily for dog-walking. The Slate-throated Redstart caused a notable shift in the park's demographics, attracting birders from around California and beyond, including visitors from as far away as Florida and Europe. During its stay it was documented on https://eBird.org through about 1300 checklists submitted by over 1000 different observers.

The Slate-throated Redstart is polytypic, comprising 12 subspecies in four groups (Pérez-Emán et al. 2010). The salmon-reddish ventral coloration of the San Francisco individual eliminates seven yellow-bellied subspecies resident in Central and South America, and the extent of white in the outer rectrices (comprising broad white tips to r4–r6 plus a white outer corner to r3; see Figure 3) is inconsistent with four of the five red-bellied subspecies, in which white in the outer tail feathers is more restricted (Harrod and Mumme 2022). Thus we conclude the San Francisco bird represents the northernmost subspecies, *M. m. miniatus*. Phylogenetically, *M. m. miniatus* is basal to the other 11 subspecies. It is also the only subspecies to migrate to any extent; the others make only small-scale altitudinal movements (Pérez-Emán et al. 2010). Migratory populations breed in the Sierra del Carmen, Coahuila, Mexico, and in northern parts of the Sierra Madre Occidental (McCormack et al. 2005, Miller et al. 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly, *M. m. miniatus* appears to account for all records to date within the United States—including those from coastal Texas, *contra* Lockwood and Freeman (2014), who tentatively suggested that these records might represent *M. m.*

FIGURE 1. California's first Slate-throated Redstart (*Myioborus miniatus*) on 2 August 2024, four days after its discovery at Pine Lake Park in San Francisco. Prebasic molt is under way; the fresh tertials and inner primaries contrast with the worn ninth primary and inner secondaries. Note secondary 2 growing in.

Photo by David Pereksta

FIGURE 2. The redstart's prebasic molt was nearly complete by 26 August 2024; the inner tertials (dropped and not yet regrown in this photograph) were the last remiges to be replaced. It is possible that an extraordinary molt migration is at least part of why this exceptional rarity appeared or persisted in San Francisco.

Photo by Henry Chiu

FIGURE 3. One of the last photos taken of the Slate-throated Redstart on 16 September 2024, the last date it was seen. The prebasic molt is complete. Note the broad white tips to rectrices 4–6 and white corner to rectrix 3, diagnostic of the nominate subspecies *M. m. miniatus*.

Photo by Ryan Sanderson

molochinus. An erroneous subspecific range map in the National Geographic Society field guide to North American birds (Dunn and Alderfer 2017) portrays *molochinus* as occurring 600 km closer to the Texas border than it really does; in reality, it is restricted to the Sierra de los Tuxtlas of southern Mexico (Wetmore 1942, J. Dunn *in litt*.).

The first record for the United States was of an adult female collected in southeastern New Mexico in April 1962 (Harris 1964). Since then, Arizona has furnished an additional 16 records (spanning 1976–2018), and Texas has accounted for 21 (1990–2024). Arizona records are all from the state's southeastern "sky islands." Texas records are principally from the mountains of the trans-Pecos region, although there are three spring records from the lowlands of south Texas (two of them coastal—one of which involves two individuals—and one from Hidalgo Co. in the lower Rio Grande valley), as well as two from the Llano Estacado region, also in spring. United States records are principally from late March through August, though there are records as early as 12 March (Hidalgo Co., Texas) and one of a bird that was found in August but remained until 12 October (Cochise Co., Arizona).

Breeding has been documented in the Sierra del Carmen, within 70 km of the border with Texas (McCormack et al. 2005). One or two birds in the Chisos Mountains, Brewster Co., Texas, built a nest in 2019 but were not confirmed to have fledged any young (Carpenter 2020). A female Slate-throated Redstart that paired with a male Painted Redstart fledged three hybrid offspring in the Chiricahua Mountains, Cochise Co., Arizona, in 2016 (Rosenberg et al. 2019). There is also a record of a Slate-throated Redstart in preformative molt (i.e., having fledged within the past month or two) from Huachuca Canyon, Cochise Co., Arizona, in late July 2013 (Arizona Field Ornithologists 2013, Rosenberg et al. 2017). Nevertheless, despite the species' pattern of occasional (and perhaps increasing, e.g., see Rosenberg et al. 2019) occurrence in suitable montane habitat just north of the border, a record for coastal northern California—some 450 km north of the previous northernmost record (Lubbock Co., Texas) and 1200 km from the closest previous record (Mt. Lemmon, Pima Co., Arizona)—was not anticipated.

The question of how a Slate-throated Redstart came to summer in San Francisco cannot be answered with confidence. Two plausible hypotheses suggest that it represented either a spring overshoot (presumably like most U.S records, and certainly like spring records from atypical habitat in the plains of northwest Texas and along the Texas coast) that arrived in California earlier in the season but went undetected until late July, or a molt migrant that summered within the species' ordinary range and made an exceptional extralimital movement to complete its prebasic molt. When the bird was found, molt had already commenced, with primaries replaced out to p7, molt of the secondaries just beginning (s1 growing and s2 dropped), the tertials and rectrices freshly replaced with r6 not yet fully grown in, and evidence of molt visible in the contour feathers on the dorsum and elsewhere (Figure 1). By late August, molt appeared to have been completed (Figures 2, 3). Early in the bird's stay, the unmolted p8–p9 and s4–s6 were narrow, strongly tapered distally, brownish, exceptionally worn, and generally consistent in condition with retained juvenile feathers, making the San Francisco bird likely to be an individual in its second calendar year undergoing its second prebasic molt (P. Pyle pers. comm.).

The molt-migration theory is supported to some degree by documentation of molt migration of substantial distances in several other parulids. Molt migration is a complex and relatively poorly understood process in which some species habitually make movements in counterintuitive directions—i.e., away from the direction in which they must go to reach their winter ranges (Pyle et al. 2018). Moreover, it may help to explain the extraordinary locale used by the Slate-throated Redstart in San Francisco: a willow thicket surrounded by *Eucalyptus* in an urban park in coastal northern California could hardly be more different from the montane pine–oak forest in which this species typically prefers to hold territory. To remain better concealed from predators during a period of more limited flight capacity, molt migrants may seek out habitats with a denser understory, and such habitats may not match those of breeding (or wintering) areas (Chambers et al. 2011). However, the scant evidence available to date documents only a limited propensity of short-distance migrants like the Slate-throated Redstart to undertake substantial molt migration: the best-documented cases among warblers are the Orange-crowned moving upslope in the montane West, the Tennessee (*Leiothlypis peregrina*) moving south from its boreal breeding grounds, and Lucy's Warbler (*L. luciae*) moving in various directions from its breeding grounds in the American Southwest (Pyle et al. 2009, 2018). Extralimital movements on a substantial scale stemming from extraordinary molt migrations have not been clearly documented in these and related or ecologically similar North American species, although this may be due at least in part to their behaving cryptically during molt and the relative dearth of effort by collectors and birders during July and August (Pyle et al. 2018).

The theory that this Slate-throated Redstart arrived in California as a spring overshoot, on the other hand, is consistent not only with this species' pattern of vagrancy elsewhere in the United States, but also with summer records of other vagrants from northern Mexico in California, such as the Red-faced Warbler (*Cardellina rubrifrons*) and Tropical Parula (*Setophaga pitiayumi*). It would, however, be somewhat surprising if the Slate-throated Redstart—a bright individual, even singing on occasion (and therefore likely a male; Shopland 1985)—had managed to escape detection at this reasonably well-covered urban locale all summer long. A combination of the overshoot and molt migration theories may be most viable: that this individual arrived in California as a spring overshoot, held territory undetected at some location(s) other than Pine Lake Park, and made a comparatively short-distance relocation to Pine Lake later in the summer to molt. Such hypotheses remain highly speculative, though, unless—or until—this species develops a pattern of vagrancy to California further.

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