

SECOND RECORD OF THE TROPICAL PARULA IN CALIFORNIA AND THE SPECIES' STATUS IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

JAKE Y. XIA, 12 Bridgewood, Irvine, California 92604; lionjake2018@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: A Tropical Parula (*Setophaga pitiayumi*) photographed and audio-recorded in Big Dalton Canyon, Los Angeles County, 12–14 May 2024 established a second record of the species for California and the first in spring or summer. Another sighting at the Switzer Picnic Area, 30.5 km to west but also within the San Gabriel Mountains, 4 July–26 September 2024, likely represented the same individual. Only the two northernmost subspecies of the Tropical Parula are partially migratory, *S. p. nigrilora*, which nests in eastern Mexico and north into south Texas, and *S. p. pulchra*, which is found along the Sierra Madre Occidental. The broad white wingbars, deep orange flanks, and pattern of the song identify the bird in the San Gabriel Mountains as *pulchra*. Narrower wingbars, paler flanks, and pattern of the song identify California's previous Tropical Parula, at Huntington Beach, Orange Co., 5 January–14 February 2018, as *nigrilora*. Despite its relatively sedentary nature, the Tropical Parula has been detected as a vagrant in Colorado, Kansas, northern Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and now at least twice in California.

OBSERVATION AND IDENTIFICATION

On the morning of 12 May 2024 I was birding the riparian corridor of Big Dalton Canyon in Los Angeles County, in habitat dominated by mixed willow, oak, sycamore, and alder woodland. Located in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains within the limits of the city of Glendora, it is surrounded by a mix of montane chaparral, scrub, and similar habitats. At about 09:45 I first heard but did not recognize a song among five or six singing Yellow Warblers (*Setophaga petechia*) in the sycamores (*Platanus racemosa*) immediately adjacent to Big Dalton Creek (at 34.1606° N, 117.8250° W), then located the bird visually. Having seen photos of California's one previous Tropical Parula (*Setophaga pitiayumi*) (Benson et al. 2020), in the winter of 2018, I soon realized it was that species. The bird was similar in size to the many Yellow Warblers in the area. It had an olive-green mantle enclosed by a dark bluish-gray back, two white wing patches, bright yellow underparts, an orangish wash between the throat and breast that extended toward the belly, and, perhaps most important, a dark eye lacking the white eye arcs of the Northern Parula (*S. americana*) and thus practically indiscernible from the surrounding blackish mask.

The bill was distinctly bicolored, the upper mandible dusky gray and the lower peachy pink. The primary color of the upperparts was a dark grayish hued with blue, enclosing a triangular patch of greenish yellow on the mantle. A distinctive black mask originating from the base of the bill encircled the eye; its contrast with the blue-gray crown was fairly well defined but was more diffuse posteriorly. The breast and flanks were washed with a rich dark orange; the throat and most of the underparts otherwise were a pale, bright yellow, fading near the legs to white that encompassed the undertail coverts. The tail was short, and its visible underside (the folded outer rectrices preventing ventral view of the central rectrices) was predominantly white, with

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a dark grayish base, thin dark lateral fringes, and broader dark edge at the tip. The visible upperside of the tail, represented by the central rectrices only (obscuring the folded outer rectrices), was slaty blue-gray, concolorous with most of the upperparts. The outer median and greater coverts were broadly tipped in white, resulting in two somewhat oblong and thick white wing bars separated by a narrow dark divide.

The Tropical Parula was very active, moving unpredictably and sallying or darting frequently. It was extraordinarily uncooperative for most observers and rarely departed from the dense foliage of the tree canopies. It favored a particular patch of sycamores but often made forays into nearby oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) or a grove of tall planted pines (*Pinus* spp.). It sang almost incessantly for ~15-min intervals, before going silent for similar periods, becoming virtually impossible to detect. Still, numerous observers were able to study it over its three-day stay, and many adequate photographs and recordings were submitted to <https://eBird.org> and other platforms. The bird remained through 14 May but was absent on the 15th. On 4 July 2024 Hai-Dang Phan found a Tropical Parula at Switzer Picnic Area, 30.5 km from Big Dalton Canyon ([ebird.org/checklist/S185378636](https://eBird.org/checklist/S185378636)), provoking speculation as to whether the two sightings represented the same bird. The Switzer Picnic Area, along the upper Arroyo Seco in the Angeles National Forest, is in riparian habitat similar to Big Dalton Canyon, albeit farther into the San Gabriel Mountains and 600 m higher in elevation. While present, that Tropical Parula remained mostly in the alders and sycamores adjacent to the creek as it did at Big Dalton.

Both birds were adult males, and the photographs and audiospectrograms show no noticeable differences in their plumage and songs. The California Bird Records Committee favors considering the sightings to be of the same bird (Tietz and McCaskie 2025). Evidence used to support either case has included photos apparently showing a small white spot on the right rectrix 4 and attempted aging of the bird from photos (K. L. Garrett pers. comm.).

Species-level identification of this bird was straightforward. The only species of possible confusion was the Northern Parula (*S. americana*), post-juvenile males of which have more extensively white underparts, gray extending from the face into the sides of the throat, a band of burnt orange and sometimes gray or black (especially in western populations) separating the yellow throat from the breast, and distinct white eye-arcs, among other differences. A hybrid Tropical Parula × Northern Parula was more of a challenge to eliminate but was still ruled out, as even hybrids most phenotypically similar to a pure Tropical Parula still possess white eye arcs of varying strength.

VOCALIZATIONS

The bird(s) sang frequently at both Big Dalton Canyon and Switzer Picnic Area. The song was similar to that of the many Yellow Warblers at both locations: three to five sweet introductory notes, followed by a rapid series of four or five notes that had a buzzy, trill-like quality, and a final sharp ending note (Figure 1). This central buzzy section proved key to distinguishing the bird from the numerous Yellow Warblers in the area. Though the Yellow Warblers' song varied, none included cadences with notes fast enough to produce a buzzy or trilling quality.

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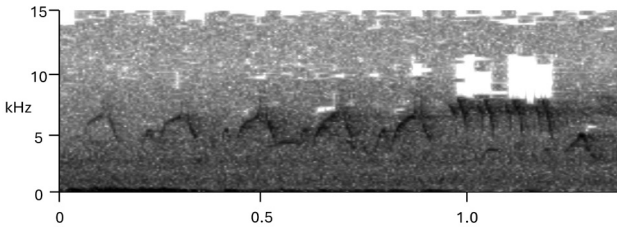


FIGURE 1. Song of the Tropical Parula (*S. p. pulchra*) recorded at Big Dalton Canyon, Los Angeles County, California, 12 May 2024. Note the five introductory notes, followed by a rapid sequence of four doubled notes, and the single ending note.

Audio recorded by Jake Xia

Within the Tropical Parula, subspecies *pulchra* and *nigrilora* have distinctly different songs, often described as being similar to the songs of the Yellow Warbler (the North American *aestiva* group of subspecies) and Northern Parula (western type A; Moldenhauer 1992), respectively. The songs of *pulchra* begin with typically two to five sweet notes (occasionally preceded by one to three softer, downslurred ones), followed by a rapid series of about five snappy, short notes often described as a trill, and then ending abruptly with a single sharp, lower-pitched note. Songs of *nigrilora* are more monotonous, usually consisting of a simple, uniform series of rising buzzy or rattle-like notes, ending with a similar abrupt final note as in *pulchra* (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

Recordings of the song, pattern of the wing bars, and flank color indicate that the Big Dalton/Switzer bird represents the subspecies *Setophaga pitiayumi pulchra* (Figure 3), which breeds on the Pacific slope of mainland Mexico from Sonora south to Oaxaca. It accounts for most of the vagrants to Arizona. *S. p. nigrilora*, which breeds from the lower Rio Grande valley south through eastern Mexico to the isthmus of Tehuantepec (Regelski and Moldenhauer 2020), is the next nearest subspecies, apart from those endemic to Socorro and the Tres Marias islands. Subspecies *nigrilora* shows smaller white wing patches and lacks the intense orange flank color of *pulchra*. Records in

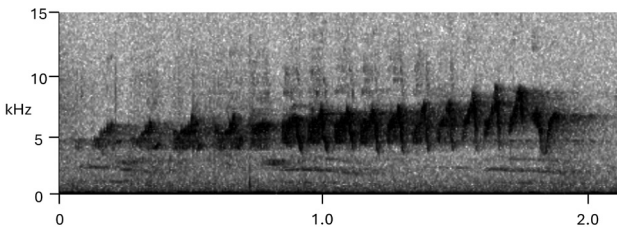


FIGURE 2. Song of Tropical Parula (*S. p. nigrilora*) recorded at Amatlán de Los Reyes, Veracruz, Mexico, 4 January 2006.

Audio recorded by Nathan Pieplow

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FIGURE 3. Tropical Parula at Big Dalton Canyon, Los Angeles County, California, 13 May 2024. Note the broad white wing patches with narrow dark separating region, and appearance of a predominantly white undertail (yielded by the folded outer rectrices) with black tips, both consistent with subspecies *pulchra*.

Photo by Chezy Yusuf

Texas and Louisiana, including one of failed breeding (Lockwood and Freeman 2014) as far west as Jeff Davis County, Texas, all likely involve *nigrilora*.

No other subspecies have been recorded in the United States, but vagrants of two, *S. p. insularis* and *S. p. graysoni*, have been reported in Baja California Sur. Subspecies *insularis*, endemic to the Tres Marias Islands, shows a less extensive black mask mostly restricted to the lores, smaller white wing bars, a burnt orange wash to the flanks (similar to that of *pulchra*), and distinct arrowhead-shaped white spots on the rectrices. Subspecies *graysoni*, breeding on Socorro Island, was thought to represent all Baja California records until Iliff et al. (2008) proved otherwise. This subspecies lacks the black mask altogether, is overall paler and duller than *pulchra* and *insularis*, has thinner and smaller white wing bars separated by a broader dark area, duller yellow underparts lacking extensive cinnamon tones, and a yellow throat patch constricted slightly by adjacent gray neck sides (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Iliff et al. 2008). Peninsular records subsequent to the four discussed by Iliff et al. (2008) are of one in the Sierra de la Laguna Biosphere Reserve on 9 August 2009 (ebird.org/checklist/S8950536), one at Ramaditas on the Magdalena Plain on 4 March 2020 (ebird.org/checklist/S65448744), one at Todos Santos on 7 March 2020 (ebird.org/checklist/S65544498), and apparently two birds together at San Antonio de la Sierra on 11 January 2025 (ebird.org/checklist/S209434349).

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Subspecies *pulchra* and *nigrilora* are geographically isolated from one another by the Mexican Plateau, which separates the Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental. Subspecies *pulchra* often migrates short distances northward in advance of the breeding season. The Big Dalton and Switzer bird was an enthusiastically singing adult male whose behavior could have been considered territorial at both locations. It may have been an overshooting migrant attempting to set up a territory and attract a mate. This contrasts with California's previous record of the Tropical Parula, of a second-year male wintering at an apartment complex in Huntington Beach, Orange Co., less than 3.2 km from the coast and far from any riparian habitat, save the urban green space of Huntington Central Park. Found by James Pike on 5 January 2018, it remained through 14 February (Benson et al. 2020). It represents the only wintering Tropical Parula recorded in the United States away from Louisiana and Texas. This bird's small white wing patches (smaller than in *pulchra*), lack of significant orange color along the flanks, and recorded song identify it as *nigrilora*. It represents the only definite record of that subspecies west of New Mexico.

Extralimital records of the Tropical Parula in the United States include two for New Mexico, one each for Colorado and Kansas, and eleven for Arizona (Table 1). All for New Mexico, Kansas, and Colorado represent *nigrilora*. Conversely, the four Arizona birds identified to subspecies were all *pulchra*. The bird in Florida Canyon in fall 2019, however, differed from most of Arizona's other Tropical Parulas in showing small white wing patches with a large interspace, possibly implying an unusual *nigrilora*.

Though many of these vagrant Tropical Parulas have been males reported to sing vigorously and behave territorially, successful breeding in the United States has yet to be documented outside of Texas. Only one record represents breeding behavior beyond territorial singing: the bird at Dillon Nature Center, Reno Co., Kansas, from 6 to 13 May 2025 was building a nest throughout its stay (ebird.org/checklist/S234629656). Apparently it was a female, as it is primarily females that build the nest, though males occasionally carry nest material (Regelski and Moldenhauer 2020). Observers noted it interacted frequently with a territorial male Northern Parula, with which it was likely paired. Unfortunately, the nest was reportedly blown out by storms and accompanying high winds (ebird.org/checklist/S240943629), and the Tropical Parula failed to reappear for the remainder of the summer. Arizona's first recorded Tropical Parula, an adult male that remained in Madera Canyon, Santa Cruz Co., from 14 July through 13 September 1984, was reportedly joined by a female for a single day on 18 July 1984, but the circumstances of the birds' interaction remain unclear, and the female was never photographed.

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TABLE 1 Extralimital Records of the Tropical Parula in the U.S., Excluding Texas and Louisiana

State and date	Location	Documentation	Subspecies
New Mexico			
5 May–10 Jun 2022 ^a	Washington Ranch, Eddy Co.	Photo, audio	<i>nigrilora</i>
12–20 Sep 2023 ^b	Sumner Lake, De Baca Co.	Photo	<i>nigrilora</i>
Colorado			
18 Jun–4 July 2005 ^c	Grandview Cemetery, Larimer Co.	Photo, audio	<i>nigrilora</i>
Kansas			
6–13 May 2025 ^d	Dillon Nature Center, Reno Co.	Photo	<i>nigrilora</i>
Arizona			
14 Jul–13 Sep 1984 ^e	Madera Canyon, Santa Cruz Co.	Photo	Undetermined
6 Jun–14 Jul 2001 ^f	Miller Canyon, Cochise Co.	Photo, audio	<i>pulchra</i>
2 Jun 2002 ^g	Sunflower, Maricopa Co.	Sight only	Undetermined
16–23 June 2006 ^g	Portal, Cochise Co.	Photo	Undetermined
15 Jul 2006 ^g	Sycamore Canyon, Santa Cruz Co.	Sight only	Undetermined
31 May 2010 ^h	Molino Basin Campground, Pima Co.	Sight only	Undetermined
9 Jun–29 Jul 2018 ⁱ	Ramsey Canyon, Cochise Co.	Photo, audio	<i>pulchra</i>
27 Aug–21 Sep 2019 ⁱ	Florida Canyon, Pima Co.	Photo	<i>nigrilora?</i>
18–23 Jun 2020 ⁱ	Huachuca Canyon, Cochise Co.	Photo, audio	<i>pulchra</i>
16 May–11 Jul 2020 ⁱ	Ramsey Canyon, Cochise Co.	Photo, audio	<i>pulchra</i>
20 Sep 2021 ^j	Morgan City Wash, Maricopa Co.	Sight only	Undetermined

^aWilliams and Baumann (2023).

^bebird.org/checklist/S235568613.

^cLeatherman and Mammoser (2007).

^debird.org/checklist/S233976269.

^eRosenberg and Witzeman (1999).

^fRosenberg et al. (2007).

^gRosenberg et al. (2011).

^hRosenberg et al. (2017).

ⁱRosenberg and Radamaker (2021).

^jRosenberg and Core (2024).

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