

## A PYRRHULOXIA WANDERS WEST TO CALIFORNIA

On 24 February 1971 Jim Fairchild briefly glimpsed a Pyrrhuloxia *Cardinalis sinuata* feeding on the ground at Weise Spring Station about 8 miles west of Westmorland, Imperial County, California. He managed to see that the bird was a large grayish finch with a red crest, some red on the face and breast, and having a short stout yellowish bill. Unfortunately, a passing vehicle flushed the bird, and it was not relocated in the following hour of searching.

Four days later, on 28 February, I checked Weise Spring Station along with Lee Jones, G. Shumway Suffel and two others. We had no trouble locating the Pyrrhuloxia, and had ample opportunities to study the bird as it foraged around the area with a flock of White-crowned Sparrows *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, and even sat on exposed perches to sing. The following description is taken from my notes:

The bird was about the size of an Albert's Towhee *Pipilo aberti*, but appeared smaller bodied and longer tailed, and looked very much like a Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*.

Underparts: forehead, crown, nape, back and rump, gray tinged olive-brown; long crest feathers on top of head, mostly red, but appeared gray towards base. Underparts: breast, belly, flanks and under tail coverts, gray, being palest on the belly and darkest along the flanks; chin and throat red, then red intermingled with gray extending down center of breast to upper belly, some red on under tail coverts; feathers on the upper legs bright red. Face: area around the base of the bill, red with no black flecking visible; bold red ring around eye. Wings: upper wing coverts, gray tinged olive-brown as back; primaries and secondaries, dark gray, the inner webs of these feathers appearing reddish; under wing coverts, mostly red (seen only when bird was in flight). Tail: tail feathers, dark gray tinged olive-brown, appearing darker than back and being darkest towards tip; inner webs of feathers, particularly basal half of outer four or five, reddish. Soft parts: bill, short and stout with both mandibles strongly curved, yellow; tarsus and feet, blackish-gray; eye, blackish.

The feathers looked fresh, and it appears the bird was in adult male plumage. A check with the persons living at Weise Spring Station indicated no cage birds had been released in the area, but one woman recalled having seen a bird with red on it around the area during the previous few weeks. Weise Spring Station is situated at the northwest corner of the intensively cultivated Imperial Valley, having flat cultivated fields on one side, and dry desert with some Creosote Bush *Larrea*, Mesquite *Prosopis*, and other plant-life of the Colorado Desert on the other side. At the station itself there are a number of Tamarisk Trees *Tamarix*, a small grass pasture, and a couple of fresh-water pools. The Pyrrhuloxia was subsequently seen by a number of interested persons, but could not be located again after 7 March.

The Pyrrhuloxia is a bird of the Lower Sonoran Zone, extending from southern Arizona and southern Texas through most of northern Mexico (A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds, 1957). The race *C. s. peninsulæ* is resident in the southern half of Baja California, and *C. s. fulvescens* is the form found in southern Arizona and northwestern Mexico. In southern Arizona the species occurs regularly west to the Ajo region, and has been recorded to the Castle Dome Mountains of southwestern Yuma County (Phillips et al. The Birds of Arizona, 1964), not more than 100 miles from Weise Spring Station. The species is also reported to wander during the winter, being found regularly away from breeding areas in some parts of Arizona (Phillips et al., loc. cit.)

## NOTES

In California there are two previous reports of the Pyrrhuloxia. Small (Audubon Field Notes, 7:236, 1953) records one, reported second hand, near Mecca, Riverside County, on 10 February 1953, and briefly glimpsed there again on 29 March. A male was seen at Cottonwood Springs, Riverside County, on 6 and 7 May 1961 (A.F.N. 14:440, 1961). No details accompany either record, and it is impossible to determine their validity. However, it is interesting to note the Mecca bird is included by Pyle (Annotated Field List of the Birds of Southern California, 1953) under "Additional Species," but was omitted when the list was revised by Small in 1961. There is a strong possibility the bird at Cottonwood Springs was released there after having been imported for photographic purposes, and much was rumored to this effect at the time of the observation.

It is wise to be cautious of sight records of the Pyrrhuloxia, for the Cardinal can sometimes look remarkably similar, and has been misidentified as this species. On 4 August 1968 Alan Craig and I checked a report of a "Pyrrhuloxia" frequenting a trailer park near Earp on the Colorado River. We managed to see the bird, but it was only a Cardinal, apparently a male molting into adult plumage. The bird was quite gray on the face and along the flanks, with the center of the breast, from the throat to the under tail coverts, bright red; the upper parts were brownish-gray, and the bird closely resembled the illustrations of adult male Pyrrhuloxias in the popular field guides (e.g. Robbins et al. A Guide to Field Identification. Birds of North America, 1966); however, the bill was pinkish, and clearly that of a Cardinal.

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