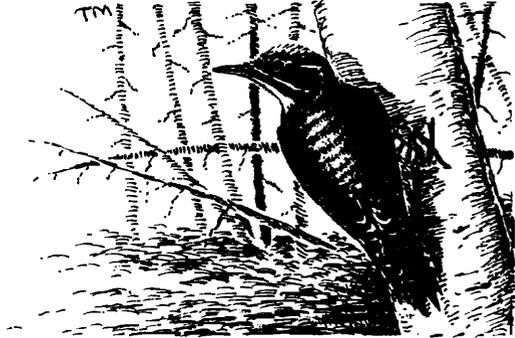


The following article is the second in a series on California rarities edited by Morlan and Roberson. It is based on materials submitted to the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC). The description and circumstances were edited from the accounts of the observer, and have been reviewed by him. Roberson prepared the distributional summary and Morlan prepared the identification summary. In this way we hope that much important information accumulated in CBRC files will become widely available.



Three-toed Woodpecker

Sketch by Tim Manolis

## FIRST RECORD OF THE THREE-TOED WOODPECKER IN CALIFORNIA

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In the late afternoon of 2 November 1985, Trochet heard the quiet tapping of a woodpecker. He was hiking along the South Fork of Pine Creek, about  $2\frac{1}{4}$  miles from the Pine Creek trailhead in the South Warner Wilderness area of the Warner Mountains, Modoc County, extreme northeastern California. Trochet traced the tapping to its source and was surprised to discover a male Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*. The bird was working the north side of a large White Fir *Abies concolor*, 30-35 feet above the ground, and was easily approached as it probed on broken branch stubs with a heavy growth of lichen. It moved quietly up the tree and quartered around to the side. After a few minutes of quiet searching, it flew to the next tree 20 yards away, giving a single sharp, slightly musical "chik" note. Trochet followed it with difficulty, falling once on the steep icy slope, but approached the bird again. The bird then became alert, called, and flew twice to the north sides of other firs, eventually stopping to give a double vocalization, before flying away to the east under the forest canopy. The bird was viewed for a total of about five minutes. Trochet took the following description:

A dark woodpecker about the size of a Hairy Woodpecker *P. villosus*, seen recently. The head was black with two narrow white curvilinear lines: one originated immediately

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behind the eye and curved gently downward, broadening to its terminus on the side of the neck, and the second originated at the gape, broadening very slightly as it extended back with little curving to its terminus just below and behind the auriculars. This lower white stripe set off a doubly-broad blackish malar stripe which connected with the black of the neck. The crown was yellow with a slight greenish cast and some short fine streaky extensions into the forecrown and hindcrown. The chin and throat were white.

The hindneck and uppermost back were mottled black on white, mostly whitish, with the remainder of the back rather crisply banded, in "ladder-backed" fashion, with black and white bands of equal widths. The folded wings were basically black and extended about half the length of the tail. The outer webs of the primaries had inconspicuous whitish spots coalescing on the folded wing as six to eight transverse lines across those feathers; visible primary tips had narrow white fringes. The tertials had whitish spots, bordering the black and white barring of the back. The upper tail coverts were black. The two central pairs of stiff, pointed tail feathers were black; the next pairs were white with black spotting on the more medial visible feathers; and the outermost retrix appeared entirely white.

The underparts were white with heavy black bars on the sides and flanks; on the flanks these bars were especially heavy and extended more toward the ventral midline. The sides of the undertail coverts were white; the belly was not seen.

The bill was black, straight and chisel-like, typical for a woodpecker. The eyes and legs were dark, but no attempt was made to count the toes (I am somewhat embarrassed to say!).

In flight, the woodpecker appeared basically black with some white on the sides of the face and an off-white mid-back.

Compared to the Black-backed Woodpecker *P. arcticus* (two of which were seen early the same day), this bird was much whiter in several areas of plumage. The strong postocular line was striking, while it is much narrower and shorter, and sometimes absent, on the Black-backed. The white wing markings were more extensive; the Black-backed seen that day had lacked tertial markings entirely. The barred back is a key mark distinguishing the species. The yellow crown patch was both more extensive and less distinctly separated from the black feathers fore and aft than in the male Black-backed seen earlier. This bird seemed slightly smaller, its bill seemed proportionately shorter, and the side and flank barring seemed crisper, less smudged. These impressions may suffer somewhat from differences in lighting—good lighting and silhouettes against light backgrounds for the Black-backed seen earlier; very subdued, late afternoon light against dark shaded backgrounds for the Three-toed. Nonetheless there were real pattern differences.

I was aware that some juvenile Hairy Woodpeckers have yellowish crowns and a suggestion of barred back or barred flanks. However, Hairy Woodpeckers should always lack barring on the sides, have much less heavy barring on the flanks, and have a very different facial pattern, with broader white lines on the face. The upper line originates above the eye and sometimes goes forward of it; the lower line broadens to coalesce with a large white patch behind the auriculars that is sometimes contiguous with the white feathering of the back. In essence, the Hairy Woodpecker has a black-and-white head, while this bird had a black head with some white stripes.

The record was accepted 9-1 by the California Bird Records Committee after two circulations and is the first for California (Bevier in prep.). Two prior reports were not accepted (Binford 1985, Morlan 1985). The Committee felt that Trochet's description fit resident *P. t. fasciatus* of southern Oregon very well.

The dissenting member wondered why more California records of this "resident" species were not available. Others felt that the distance of this sighting

from resident populations was short enough for a wanderer or possibly a precursor of range expansion. The central issue contributing to the lone negative vote was the propriety of accepting single-observer first state records without other documentation (such as a photograph). Some state and provincial committees, and the A.O.U. Check-list Committee (1983, 1987), do not accept such records, either excluding them from consideration, relegating them to "hypothetical" lists or accepting them in a lesser level of the main list. Nonetheless, the California Bird Records Committee evaluates and occasionally accepts first state records supported only by the description of a single observer. This is the second such species admitted to the state list, following the Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata* (Morlan 1985). The Committee feels it appropriate to review each such record on its own merits. For any record, if the details convince at least 9 of the 10 members, the record is accepted. The description and CBRC comments, open to researchers, remain on permanent file, and publication such as this makes the documentation even more accessible. The Committee welcomes comments that bear on the correctness of any of its decisions.

#### DISTRIBUTIONAL SUMMARY

The Three-toed Woodpecker ranges through the northern coniferous forests of the Holarctic Region, in Eurasia from Scandinavia to Siberia, south locally to southern Europe and western China, and in North America from north-western Alaska to Newfoundland, south locally to southern Oregon, northern New England, and in the Rocky Mountains to south-central New Mexico (A.O.U. 1983; figure 1). Although mostly resident in North America, the race *P. t. bacatus* has occurred in winter south of the breeding range to Nebraska, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Delaware (A.O.U. 1957, DeSante and Pyle 1986).

Oregon populations occur in the Willowa and Blue mountains of the north-east, and along the Cascades as far south as Crater Lake National Park, Klamath County (Ramsey 1978), reaching their southern terminus at the eastern base of Mt. McLoughlin, Jackson County (Gabrielson and Jewett 1940), only 30 miles north of the California border (but 140 miles northwest of the California sighting).

Bock and Bock (1974) suggested that the distribution of this species was closely tied to the distribution of spruce *Picea* trees. In the Willowas and Cascades the spruce is Engelmann *P. engelmannii*, a species whose range barely reaches California, where it is limited to Russian Peak in Siskiyou County and Upper Clark Creek in Shasta County (Munz 1965, Griffin and Critchfield 1972). Future searching of these areas might reveal additional Three-toed Woodpeckers. Recent research, however, suggests that in the Cascades of central Oregon this species may be associated with the Lodgepole Pine *Pinus contorta* (R. Goggans pers. comm.). The bark of the Lodgepole Pine is similar to that of spruce in its flakiness, and this type of bark structure may be preferred by Three-toed Woodpeckers for foraging.

Northern and higher mountain populations of the Three-toed Woodpecker show minor migratory movements and may even be irruptive after insect epidemics (Short 1982, Yunick 1985). Wandering has been noted in north-eastern Oregon (e.g., a record near Baker, Baker County, some 50 miles south

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of the Willows, in winter 1986-87; Anderson 1987), and this November record for California might be attributed to such movements.

#### SUBSPECIES

Short (1982) recognized eight races of the Three-toed Woodpecker, three in North America: eastern and mid-western *bacatus*, Rocky Mountain *dorsalis*, and far western *fasciatus*. The latter ranges from Alaska and the Yukon south along the Cascades to southern Oregon (A.O.U. 1957). *P. t. bacatus* is the smallest and is very dark with less white on the face and back; it is the only American race with dark bars on the outer tail feathers. The two western races are larger with more white on the back and face. *P. t. dorsalis* has the white of the back continuous, usually not broken by black bars (Ridgway 1914, Russell 1976). *P. t. fasciatus* has more distinct barring on the back and underparts (Ridgway 1914, Short 1982). The Eurasian races vary greatly from almost black-backed to essentially white-backed (Short 1982). The California bird fits *fasciatus*.

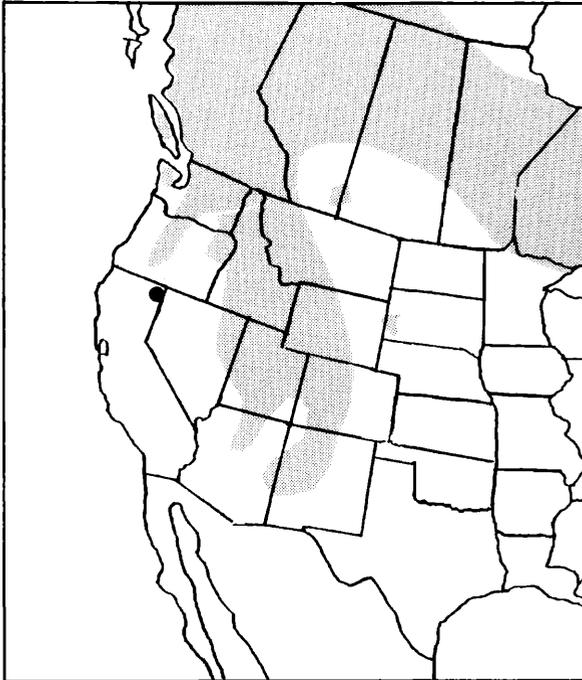


Figure 1. Approximate breeding range of the Three-toed Woodpecker (shaded) in western North America and location of the California record (dot).

## IDENTIFICATION SUMMARY

In the East, some specimens of *bacatus* have only a few white or mouse-gray spots or spot-bars on the back, and a few are actually black-backed, causing confusion with the Black-backed Woodpecker (Short 1974, 1982). This problem and other variations were discussed by Russell (1973, 1974) and LaFrance (1983, 1986). Although these birds have barred outer tail feathers, unlike the white outer retrices of the Black-backed and the western races of Three-toed, these feathers are often obscured under field conditions (Short 1974). Russell (1974) further discussed a Nova Scotia specimen of the Black-backed Woodpecker with white feathers in its back. Those feathers were entirely white, unlike the white-tipped back feathers of *P. t. bacatus*. A similar *P. arcticus* with two small round white spots on its back was observed by LaFrance (pers. comm.). Extremely worn summer Black-backeds, with quills showing, may also appear to have white in the back (LaFrance 1983).

In good light, the Three-toed Woodpecker looks slightly browner and less contrastingly black and white than the Black-backed Woodpecker. The subocular white stripe of the Three-toed is narrower, and the black malar stripe broadly meets the side of the neck, whereas this stripe is more isolated on the Black-backed. On the Three-toed the loreal area and forehead are mixed white and black instead of pure white. Perhaps the best mark is the line of white spots, lacking on the Black-backed, formed by the tips to the secondaries and tertials on the Three-toed, visible when the bird has its back to the observer. In the male Black-backed, the yellow cap is usually rounder and more neatly bordered with black than in the Three-toed, which usually has the cap more elongated, streaked with black, and placed slightly farther back (Short 1974, LaFrance 1983). The Three-toed might also be distinguished from the Black-backed by its smaller size and proportionately smaller bill (Short 1974, Stalcup 1985). Of course, any obviously "ladder-backed" bird is not a Black-backed Woodpecker.

Vocalizations and drumming of the two are also different, especially the call notes and rattle-like calls, which are diagnostic (Short 1974). Experience with both species is necessary to distinguish them accurately.

In the Rocky Mountains, a female Three-toed Woodpecker with an almost white back can be confused with a Hairy Woodpecker (Zimmer 1985). Throughout its North American range, the Three-toed Woodpecker is most likely to be confused with the juvenal-plumaged Hairy Woodpecker. A yellow-orange cap is common in the juvenal Hairy of both sexes. The juvenal Hairy also often has flank or back cross-barring. The Hairy Woodpecker inhabiting the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, *P. v. piceoides*, has flank and back barring even as an adult (fortunately this race is unknown away from these islands; A.O.U. 1957). The Newfoundland race of Hairy, *P. v. terraenovae*, also has back barring and flank streaking as an adult (Russell 1974), and the flanks may be streaked in some adult Hairy Woodpeckers of all races (Short 1982, George 1972, Godfrey 1986).

Hairy Woodpeckers of all ages are best distinguished from Three-toed Woodpeckers by their facial pattern. The Hairy has much broader white stripes framing the dark cheek, and the subocular white stripe expands into a large white patch on the side of the neck. On the Three-toed the stripe above the

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eye is much narrower and usually curves down toward the upper back, though on a few individuals it may not extend behind the eye at all. At close range, the nasal tufts are white on Hairy and black on Three-toed (Russell 1976). Hairy Woodpeckers usually have white spotting on the wing coverts (profuse in the eastern subspecies except *terraenovae*, slight or absent in the western subspecies), which may help separate them from Three-toeds, which lack these spots.

The postjuvinal molt in the Hairy Woodpecker lasts about four months and is usually completed by mid-October (George 1972). The first basic plumage is similar to that of the adult Hairy, making identification easier once the yellow-orange cap is lost. When in doubt, count the toes.

Short (1969) described an interesting example of melanism in the Hairy Woodpecker. This bird had black barring on the back, sides, and flanks and narrow white facial stripes, all field marks of Three-toed. However, it was an adult male, with a normal red pattern on the head, and four toes. This individual was abnormal in having a white bill and large white patch on its underwing. It illustrates possible variation in common species and the need for caution in the identification of rarities.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank CBRC members Jon L. Dunn, Louis R. Bevier, Kimball L. Garrett, Curtis Marantz, Stephen F. Bailey, Richard Stallcup, Richard A. Erickson, and Jeri M. Langham for their helpful comments in reviewing this record, and Ferdinand LaFrance for unpublished information. Rebecca Goggans and Steve Summers reviewed an earlier version of this note and provided useful comments. Tim Manolis kindly drew the sketch.

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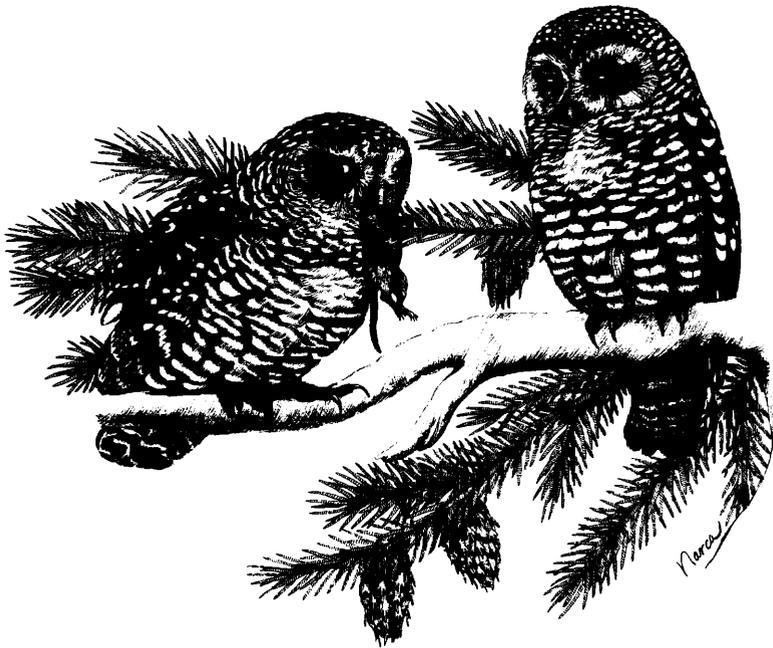
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Spotted Owls

Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig