

Green-tailed Towhee in Forest Park — State's Ninth Record

by Robert Morgan

A Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) was discovered 12 October 2001 at 10 a.m. at Concordia Cemetery, Forest Park, IL. It was a good day for sparrows at the cemetery. Nine other species were present, the commonest being Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) (50), White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) (20), and White-throated Sparrow (*Z. albicollis*) (20). The sparrows were concentrated in a field at the cemetery's northwestern edge bordered by the Des Plaines River. This field contains piles of old logs and tree stumps, mounds of earth covered in weeds, and brush piles.

While I was checking through the many sparrows, I noticed a "green" sparrow digging on the ground for seeds. It was on a large earth mound covered in many species of weeds, especially common being lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium album*) and foxtail, probably *Setaria viridis*.

When the bird hopped up off the ground and perched in the weeds, I identified it as a Green-tailed Towhee and noted the following details: It was slightly larger than the nearby White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows, and it had a long, green tail. Most noticeable was the bright rufous crown and striking face pattern. Seen head on, the bird showed a white, diamond-shaped throat and chin bordered by a dark malar stripe, outside of which was a white sub-moustachial stripe. In addition there was a white supraloral area. The rest of the underparts were mostly gray on the breast, changing to white on the belly. Upperparts were olive-green with some very fine dark streaks on the mantle. Wings and tail were green, narrowly edged yellow, and there was a pale spot at the carpal. Bill was dark and legs gray.

The towhee moved between the earthen mound, where it was actively feeding, and the log pile, where it seemed to go for safety. The bird was observed in good light down to 30 feet for about 45 minutes at the initial sighting.

Several times, the towhee called softly "may eep" and, when alarmed, raised its crest feathers and flicked its tail from side to side. The bird gives a tseeee call (see Dobbs et al 1998), which helped observers relocate the towhee when it had seemingly disappeared.

I left the towhee after about 45 minutes and phoned it in to the hotline and got a message on IBET. Many observers came to see the bird and it was still present at 5 p.m. when the cemetery closes. Unfortunately the bird was not relocated 13 October, but was apparently seen again by a few observers 14 October.



Green-tailed Towhee. 12 October 2001. Forest Park, Cook County. Photo by Jerry Kumery.

No one reported seeing the bird after that. This bird represents the ninth record of Green-tailed Towhee for Illinois. The rusty-capped western sparrow is normally associated with dense shrubs, dense montane chaparral, on dry slopes, in higher valleys and foothills (Rising 1996). The bird is casual north to northwestern Washington, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, usually in late spring, and also casual east, mainly in winter, to southwestern Quebec and Nova Scotia, and south across central and eastern United States to the Gulf of Mexico, with records for at least 22 U.S. states east of its range. Winter records also exist for Cuba (Dobbs et al 1998).

The last Green-tailed Towhee observed in Illinois was 20-21 May 1996 in a Poplar Grove backyard in Boone County. The towhee, photographed by Dan Williams 21 May 1996, was discovered by Arlene Brei that same day as she looked through the pouring rain in her backyard and saw what she thought was a weird kind of thrush. The next day, Brei awoke at 7:15 a.m. to a strange song she had never heard before. It was clear and dry; she found the picture of the towhee in her father's 1923 edition of Chester Reed's Land Birds East of the Rockies (Williamson 1996).

Fourteen birders saw this bird, Illinois' eighth record of Green-tailed Towhee. Three previous records were from spring, four were from winter (Bohlen 1989).

Literature Cited

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