

## Canada's first Bluethroat nest and other noteworthy sightings from Ivvavik National Park, Yukon

Cameron D. Eckert and Bruce Mactavish

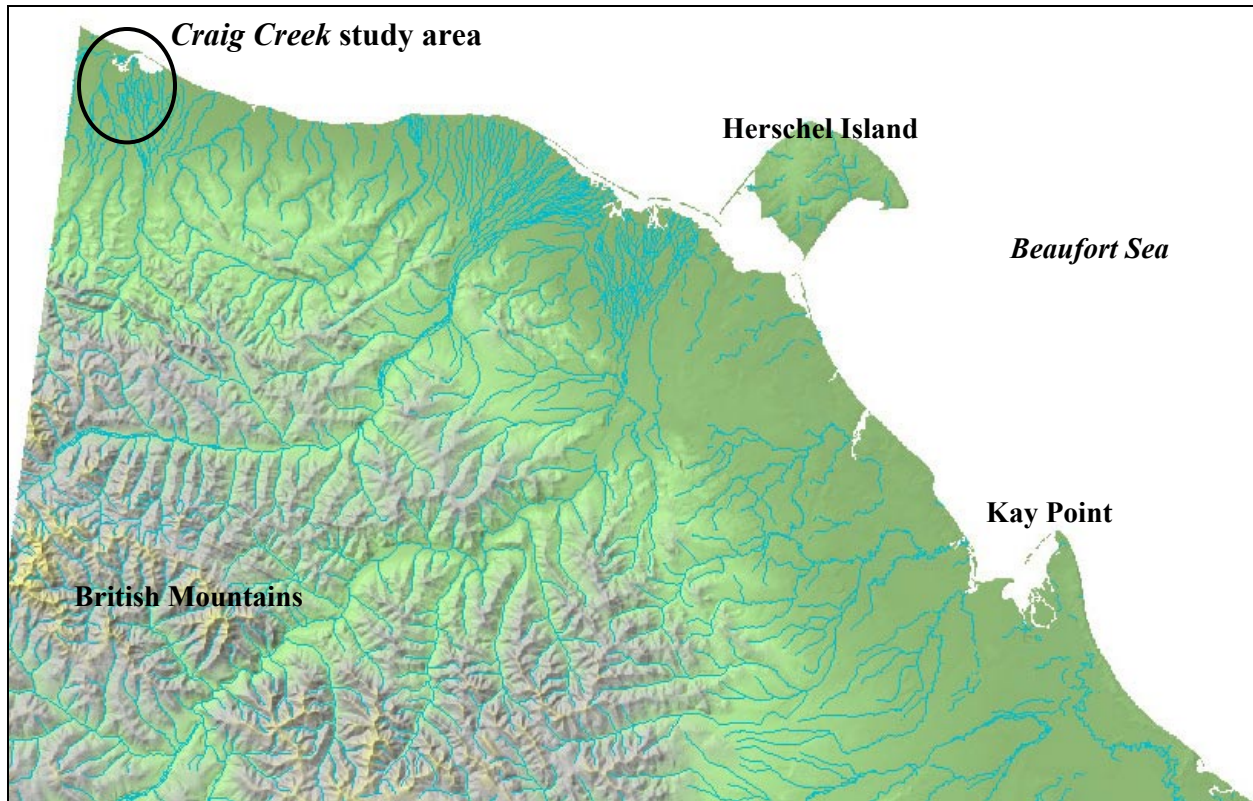


Home of the Bluethroat – Craig Creek, Ivvavik National Park, Yukon. June 25, 2003. Photo by C.D. Eckert

On June 22, 2003 the list of species thought to breed in Canada, but not yet confirmed became one shorter with the discovery of Canada's first Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* nest on the Yukon's North Slope. The Bluethroat is an Old World thrush that winters in Southeast Asia and breeds widely across western and northern Alaska. It was first recorded in Canada on June 9, 1973 at the upper Babbage River on the Yukon's North Slope (Taylor et al. 1974). The subsequent 3 decades provided 16 more records from rivers across the Yukon's North Slope, including 15 males, and a single fleeting observation of a female (Sinclair et al. 2003). The *Birds of the Yukon Territory* noted that a confirmed breeding record for Bluethroat "would constitute a significant event in Canada's ornithological history" (Sinclair et al. 2003). On June 25, 2003 our team of 5, sponsored by the Canadian Wildlife Service, flew 320 km northwest from Inuvik, NWT to Craig Creek in Ivvavik National Park at the far western edge of the Yukon's North Slope.

On board were Cameron Eckert, Bruce Mactavish, Brian Bell, Erin Spiewak, and Judy Selamio from Aklavik, NWT. We shared camp and numerous adventures with Teresa Earl and Fritz Mueller, a writer-photographer team from Whitehorse. At the heart of this 19 day research expedition to learn more about the region's breeding bird communities, was the quest to find Canada's first Bluethroat nest.

That 30 years had passed between Canada's first Bluethroat sighting and the first nest highlights both the furtive nature of the species, and the remoteness of the landscape it inhabits. This area is well beyond the reach of all but the most experienced and well-provisioned guided trips. Craig Creek flows a course of about 25 km from the British Mountains north across the Coastal Plain into Clarence Lagoon on the Beaufort Sea. The Coastal Plain is relatively compressed in this area, with the mountains only about 14 km from the coast, and our camp on the east fork of Craig Creek was about mid-way across.



Map showing the study area location at the far northwestern edge of the Yukon's North Slope.

The convergence of mountains, rivers, tundra, and coast creates an environment of awesome beauty. We chose this location as it had the highest number of Bluethroat observations (6) during landbird surveys conducted at four main rivers across the Yukon's Coastal Plain in June 1992-93. As well, the area features numerous other rare Yukon breeders such as Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*, and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*.

Our approach was to survey the major creeks for singing Bluethroats and then follow up with intensive observations of territorial males while watching for females and signs of nesting. Every day became a walking marathon as we routinely covered distances of 20 km, and on a few epic days staggered back to camp having completed a 40 km trek. By June 19, we had found 8 male Bluethroats all located in streamside willow thickets inland from our camp. Typically, these willow thickets ranged from 0.5 to 1.5 m in height, with a mix of open areas, and some fairly impenetrable dense stands. Taller willows, up to 2 m, scattered throughout were used for singing perches. The Bluethroat's song is a birding trip in

itself. It displays uncanny mimicry skills as it strings together the songs and calls of an amazing array of species including American Golden-Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*, Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*, Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*, Yellow Wagtail, White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, redpoll *Carduelis* sp., and Arctic Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus parryii* to name a few. All this, together with a lively flight song, and a brilliant iridescent blue throat makes for an exceptionally charismatic bird.

On June 22, we began extended vigils at Bluethroat territories, and the very first day proved to be an immensely rewarding one. It was late in the day and there was little song activity by the time we arrived at the southernmost Bluethroat territory on the west fork of Craig Creek. As we watched the willow thickets and walked quietly through the brush, CE spotted a female Bluethroat hopping from branch to branch but sticking close to an opening in the willows. We knew such opportunities would be rare, and were determined not to let this one slip away.

While BM watched the female, CE and ES retreated to a good vantage point. As soon as BM left the spot, the female disappeared into the willows. With a fix on that location we returned in time to see the female skulking away. Moments later a wave of euphoria broke as CE spotted the nest, a finely constructed grass cup containing 6 bluish-green eggs, on the side of a low bank at the edge of the willows. We minimized disturbance of the nesting pair, staying only long enough to record habitat measurements, take documentary photographs, and periodically check on the progress of the nest. On a subsequent visit to the site, the female showed her secretive side as she moused quietly off the nest while we were still 35 m away, and did not reappear. On our last visit to the nest, on July 2, the pair was busily feeding their 6 newly hatched young.

The discovery of a Bluethroat nest relatively early in the trip eased the pressure of achieving one of our primary goals. A good thing, as there would be many surprises to enjoy. On June 25, we arrived at the west branch of Craig Creek to see a largish blackbird with a relatively long tail sitting atop a tall willow. The silhouette was familiar to a few in our group, but not one expected in this Arctic environment. A closer view confirmed that it was a female Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*, apparently the first recorded in the Beaufort Sea region (Johnson and Herter 1989). It showed a heavy black bill, black legs, pale yellow eye, and its dull iridescent blue head contrasted with a brown body. Perhaps not an exciting species for most Canadian birders, but at nearly 1,400 km beyond its breeding range, this was something like a Scott's Oriole *Icterus spurius* turning up in Winnipeg.

We established a routine of morning Bluethroat watches, followed by searches of the willows and other habitats, as the song activity dropped off. On June 28, CE was deep in the willows and heard a "junco-like trill", a sound we had listened for keenly from the start and not because we were hoping to see a junco. BM was out on the adjacent tundra about a kilometre away, when he received the call via hand-held radio. Moments later CE spotted a small green warbler emerge briefly from the willows confirming that a "Yukon mega" was in our midsts. BM made record time across the tundra.



**Top to bottom:** i) A male Bluethroat surveys its territory, Craig Creek area, Yukon, June 24, 2003 (Cameron D. Eckert). ii) **Canada's first Bluethroat nest** – Craig Creek, Yukon, June 22, 2003 (Cameron D. Eckert). iii) The female Bluethroat at her nest site, Craig Creek, Yukon, June 22, 2003 (Bruce Mactavish).



**Canada's second documented Arctic Warbler – Craig Creek area, Yukon, June 28, 2003. The conspicuous yellowish supercilium and short white wing bar are diagnostic for this species. Photos by Cameron D. Eckert**

This bird appeared to be on the move, darting from willow to willow feeding actively and pausing occasionally to sing. Over the next three hours we snatched good views and poor photos of its conspicuous buffy-yellow supercilium and dark eyeline, short white wing bar, plain olive green crown, back, wings and tail, whitish throat, with a pale yellow wash across the breast and flanks, and warbler-like bill – dark at the tip with a pale base. Its call was a harsh ‘zrit’, and its trilling song was about 12 notes long varying in pitch and quality from rich to flat and metallic. We enthusiastically answered a question that BM had posed back in April 2003 – “Do you think Arctic Warbler [*Phylloscopus borealis*] is a possibility on the Yukon coast?” with a resounding yes! This Arctic Warbler looked brighter and greener than is illustrated in some field guides (e.g. Jonsson 1992), being most similar to the illustration of a “bright adult” in Sibley (2000). Our bird’s relatively small bill suggested that it was likely *P. b. kennicotti*, the subspecies found in Alaska (see Jantunen 2003). It had been 54 years since Canada’s only previous documented record of the species; one collected at Mould Bay, Prince Patrick Island, NWT on July

21, 1949 (Godfrey 1986). Sinclair et al. (2003) listed this species as hypothetical in the Yukon based on Biota Consultants’ (1995) report of an “unconfirmed” sighting of 2 birds in the Firth River area on July 19, 1995.

The tingle of excitement over the Arctic Warbler was still very fresh; in fact the day was not yet over, when Craig Creek unveiled its next avian treasure. A midnight dash across the tundra was prompted by a strange song, a hoarse double-phrase ‘tulip-tulip’, heard by BM near camp, then an unfamiliar bird showing rust in its tail seen near our cook tent by BB, and finally a high flying *Turdus* thrush, apparently headed to its night roost, calling a somewhat squeaky ‘crk-crk-crk’ or ‘du-du-du’ heard by CE along with BM and BB. These meager fragments suggested that the bird could be an Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus*, or Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanni*, although it could still be explained away as an abnormal American Robin *Turdus migratorius*. The sprint across the tundra proved unsuccessful, and the story might have ended there, but on July 1 at 06:30 hrs as BM was crawling out of his tent he heard the same squeaky toy ‘crk-crk-crk’ and saw a robin-like bird fly up out of the willows and

head westward. Later in the morning CE heard the hoarse ‘tulip-tulip’ at the original location, and with BM spotted a robin-sized *Turdus* thrush sitting on a willow as the source of the strange song. It proved to be an amazingly elusive bird, especially as it was locked in a wide-ranging battling with a couple of American Robins and never sat long enough for a photo. Finally, both CE and BM were able to “lock on” for a good view. First, CE had an excellent rear view noting its long creamy-white supercilium and malar extending around the sides of the neck and framing the black cheek. It showed a dark brown crown, back and tail with a rust-coloured tail base. In flight, it flashed rufous-golden underwings, almost translucent towards the primaries. Then it flew straight at BM, passing just overhead and providing a brief yet fantastic view. BM noted a bird the size and shape of a robin, with a distinct blackish solid patch in the cheek area, white underparts with much black blotching and markings lacking a distinct overall pattern but concentrated on the upper chest and flanks. The overall impression of the body from the underside was white with heavy black markings, and no red at all. In contrast to the white and black underparts were the reddish wings. The primaries and secondaries on the upper side were a shiny coppery-red, almost metallic in the sun. The reddish colour was in stark contrast to the rest of the dull colours on the bird. The reddish was

visible on the upper side of the wing during down flaps. BM’s arms-raised, victory call of “Dusky Thrush” crystallized this precious birding moment. This established the Yukon’s second documented record for the species (see Eckert 2001). There is at least one other record from the Beaufort Sea region, at Barrow, Alaska on June 16, 1971 (Pitelka 1974, Johnson and Herter 1989).

This account is already long, and it only stirs the surface of the innumerable ecological spectacles we encountered. Every day of this trip was immersed in a sense of anticipation and discovery. During our stay at Craig Creek we recorded 80 species of birds, with confirmed breeding records for 32 species. The birdlife was distinctly Arctic with all 4 Yukon loons, King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*, Common Eider *S. mollissima*, all 3 jaegers, Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*, Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*, Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria*, Willow Ptarmigan *Lagopus lagopus*, Rock Ptarmigan *L. mutus*, Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus*, Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*, and Hoary Redpoll *C. hornemanni*. Nest-finding highlights, other than the Bluethroat, included Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*, Ruddy Turnstone, Baird’s Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*, Smith’s Longspur *Calcarius pictus*, and 3 Yellow Wagtail nests. Our final Bluethroat tally was 8-10 males, 2 females, and one nest.

---

The Yukon’s third **Common Grackle** – a female at Craig Creek, Yukon on June 25, 2003. Photo by Cameron D. Eckert

---



Conservation biologists describe wilderness based on the presence of wide ranging species such as Barren-ground Caribou *Rangifer tarandus* and top-level carnivores such as Grizzly Bears *Ursus arctos*. At Craig Creek we witnessed the awesome migration of the massive Porcupine Caribou herd as the thousands of cows and their tiny calves moved from the birthing grounds to summer feeding areas. Each day during this movement, we

gave a wide berth to Grizzly Bears wandering up the creeks, or lying in wait in the willows for a stream-side caribou ambush. Ivvavik National Park is wilderness on the grandest of scales. The smaller and less common species, such as Bluethroat and Yellow Wagtail may not be considered “ecosystem drivers”, but they are also integral to the character and diversity of these Arctic ecosystems.



**Northern wilderness – thousands of Porcupine Caribou on the move from their birthing grounds to summer feeding range. Craig Creek, Ivvavik National Park, Yukon, June 30, 2003. Photo by Cameron D. Eckert**

### Literature Cited

Biota Consultants. 1995. Landbird survey in Ivvavik National Park, Yukon Territory – interim report. Unpublished report for Ivvavik National Park, Inuvik, NT. 49 pp.

Eckert, C.D. 2001. Dusky Thrush a Yukon first in Whitehorse. *Birders Journal*. 9:306-310.

Godfrey, W.E. 1986. The birds of Canada. 2nd Edition. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, ON. 595 pp.

Jantunen, J. 2003. Arctic Warbler. *Birders Journal* 12:24-30.

Johnson, S.R. and D.R. Herter. 1989. The birds of the Beaufort Sea. BP Exploration (Alaska) Inc., Anchorage, Alaska. 372 pp.

Jonsson, L. 1992. Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 559 pp.

Pitelka, F.A. 1974. An avifaunal review for the Barrow region and North Slope of arctic Alaska. *Arctic and Alpine Research* 6:161-184.

Sinclair, P.H., W.A. Nixon, C.D. Eckert, and N.L. Hughes. 2003. *Birds of the Yukon Territory*. UBC Press, Vancouver, BC. 595 pp.

Taylor, P.S., R. Salter, M.A. Gollop, and J.J. Taylor. 1974. The Bluethroat, a new bird for Canada. *Canadian Field-Naturalists* 88:85.

**Reference this article as:** Eckert, C.D., and B. Mactavish. 2004. Home of the Bluethroat: Canada's first Bluethroat nest and other noteworthy sightings from Ivvavik National Park, Yukon. *Birders Journal* 12 (6):250-257.

## Birding among Bluethroats

**Photos by Cameron D. Eckert**

Spectacular landscapes, charismatic birds and wildlife, and rich floral blooms are all part of life at Craig Creek in Ivavik National Park. It is a place of unlimited natural experiences where every day is anticipated with a sense of discovery. It is a true wilderness so obviously deserving of our Country's highest order of conservation and habitat protection.



### **Counter-clockwise from top:**

A dark-morph **Parasitic Jaeger** patrols its nesting grounds at Clarence Lagoon on June 27, 2003.

A spectacular bloom of ***Polemonium acutiflorum*** at Craig Creek on July 2, 2003.

The worldwide population of **Wandering Tattlers** numbers just 10,000; this species was one of our nest finding highlights at Craig Creek on June 22, 2003.





**Clockwise from top:**

Two female **King Eiders** trail two female **Common Eiders** at Clarence Lagoon on June 30, 2003.

A male **Yellow Wagtail** surveys its territory at Craig Creek on July 1, 2003.

An **American Tree Sparrow**, one of the area's most common songbirds, collects food at Craig Creek on June 26, 2003.