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THE MANGROVE YELLOW WARBLER REACHES CALIFORNIA

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The Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) comprises three groups of subspecies distributed across the Americas, from Alaska and northern Canada south through the West Indies and the mainland of Middle America to the northern coast of South America and the Galapagos Islands. The groups differ primarily in the head pattern of adult males (Lowther et al. 1999). The Northern Yellow Warbler (*S. p. aestiva* group) comprises the predominantly migratory subspecies with a green and/or yellow crown that breed across much of the United States, Canada, and northern and central Mexico; the Golden Yellow Warbler (*S. p. petechia* group) comprises the largely resident subspecies, most with a chestnut crown, found in south Florida, the Caribbean, and the coast of northeastern South America; and the Mangrove Yellow Warbler (*S. p. erithachorides* group) comprises the largely resident subspecies, most with a fully chestnut head, found in coastal mangroves from extreme southern Texas and central Baja California south as far as the coast of northwestern South America, with an isolated population on the Galapagos Islands that resembles the Golden Yellow Warbler in the extent of red on the head (Lowther et al. 1999). Although currently considered one species (AOU 1998), each of the three subspecies groups has been considered a full species by some authors (Hellmayr 1935).

While counting birds on 18 December 2007 for the Salton Sea (South) Christmas Bird Count, Johnson located a formative-plumaged (first year) male Yellow Warbler (*sensu lato*) at the mouth of the Alamo River, Imperial County, California (33.2066° N, 115.6152° W; *N. Am. Birds* 62:304; Figure 1), whose head was more extensively red than expected of a Northern Yellow Warbler, the subspecies group occurring regularly in California. The bird was feeding in a stand of saltcedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*) near the shore of the Salton Sea and was seen only by Johnson and the two other observers present at the time, Daryl Coldren and Ayla Reith. Johnson was able to obtain four photos of the bird through binoculars before it moved away and was not seen again.

Following this record, Billings located a definitive-plumaged (adult) male Mangrove Yellow Warbler in a small stand of *Eucalyptus* sp. and *Myoporum laetum* between a housing complex and a busy freeway near the mouth of the San Diego River, San Diego County, California (32.7574° N, 117.2175° W), 13 January 2009. It remained through 27 March 2009 (*N. Am. Birds* 63:325 and 358; back cover of this issue) and was seen by many observers. These two individuals represent the first records of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler for California and the second and third records for the United States west of Texas, following a record of an adult male at Roosevelt Lake, Gila County, Arizona, 31 July 2004 (Rosenberg et al. 2007, Banfield and Newell 2009).

Although definitive-plumaged male Mangrove Yellow Warblers with an entirely chestnut head are readily identified, other age classes are more challenging to distinguish from the Northern Yellow Warbler. A review of specimens of Yellow Warblers at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (P. Pyle in litt.) and the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (O. Johnson) found that formative-plumaged male Mangrove Yellow Warblers show a mostly green or grayish head and body with a smattering of chestnut feathers on the crown and sides of the head, while first-spring males are

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Figure 1. Mangrove Yellow Warbler at the mouth of the Alamo River, Imperial County, California, 18 December 2007. The presence of a molt limit (two generations of feathers, some juvenile feathers retained) in the greater coverts indicates formative plumage, and the smattering of red feathers on the crown, throat, lores, eye ring, and portions of the auriculars indicates a male.

Photo by Oscar Johnson

extremely variable in the extent of chestnut on the head. Some first-spring males have only a few chestnut feathers on the head, while others show a largely chestnut head with just a few green feathers interspersed, approaching the full chestnut head of the male's definitive plumage. Thus any male Yellow Warbler (*sensu lato*) with at least a few red feathers on the sides of the head indicates the Mangrove Yellow Warbler, as was the case with the bird at the Salton Sea. Note that a very rare Northern Yellow Warbler can show a red cap approaching that of the Golden Yellow Warbler, but never the extensive red head of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler (J. Dunn pers. comm.). See Curson et al. (1994) and Dunn and Garrett (1997) for a detailed review of the identification of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler, including of female and immature plumages. Additionally, all subspecies of the Mangrove and Golden Yellow Warblers show a primary projection shorter and tarsi thicker than in the subspecies of the Northern Yellow Warbler.

While all subspecies of the Mangrove and Golden Yellow Warblers are considered resident, the northernmost populations of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler make limited movements southward in the winter. The subspecies of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler that occur nearest California are *S. p. castaneiceps* of Baja California Sur from San Ignacio south to the cape district and *S. p. rhizophorae* of mainland Mexico from southern Sonora to Sinaloa (Lowther et al. 1999). Rosenberg et al. (2007) suggested on the basis of geographic proximity that the Arizona record may refer to the mainland Mexican subspecies *S. p. rhizophorae*. Russell and Monson (1998) stated from extensive banding in the mangroves near Punta Chueca, Sonora, that the Mangrove Yellow Warbler is only a summer visitant, arriving in early April and departing in late September. They cited only a handful of winter records from coastal Sonora. Also, the six records of (presumably) *S. p. castaneiceps* well away from mangroves in the northern reaches of Baja California Sur (R. A. Erickson pers. comm.) are evidence for this subspecies straying north of its known breeding range. These six records are

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from October to March, as were the two California records outlined here. The only record of the Mangrove Yellow Warbler from the state of Baja California comes from Bahía de Los Angeles (190 km north of the normal breeding range), where three birds, including two singing males, were found on 1 June 2008 (*N. Am. Birds* 62:622). However, using mark–recapture methods, Schweizer and Whitmore (2013) found no evidence of seasonal movement of adults of *S. p. castaneiceps* in Baja California Sur, perhaps suggesting Sonora as the source for the California records. The definitive-plumaged males of the two subspecies differ only slightly, with *S. p. castaneiceps* having a slightly less extensive chestnut hood, being somewhat more greenish below, and having a paler throat, longer tail, and narrower streaking below than *S. p. rhizophorae* (Browning 1994, Curson 2010). The San Diego individual showed very fine streaking below and a chestnut hood with a slightly paler throat, possibly suggesting *S. p. castaneiceps*, although either subspecies could reach California. Without specimen vouchers, subspecific identification of the birds we have reported may not be possible.

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“Featured Photo” by © Vic Murayama of Chula Vista, California: Mangrove Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*, possibly of subspecies *castaneiceps*), near the mouth of the San Diego River, San Diego County, California, 13 January 2009, representing the second record of the Mangrove Warbler for California and third for the western United States of these subspecies normally restricted to mangroves along tropical coasts north to Baja California Sur and Sonora. The entirely chestnut head and a single generation of feathers in the wings indicate a definitive-plumaged male.

