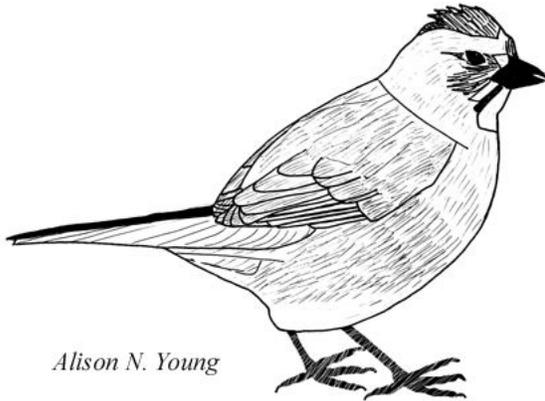


# BIRD OF THE MONTH

At Mono Lake

## GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE (*Pipilo chlorurus*)



Alison N. Young

### About Green-tailed Towhees

Green-tailed Towhees are part of the sparrow family, though they are distinguished from sparrows by their long tail. Their scientific name is *Pipilo chlorurus*, which roughly translates to “colorful chirper,” and their common name attests to the bright yellow-green of their tail. As small ground-nesting birds, they are highly reliant on the sagebrush habitat of the Mono Basin. In fact, Green-tailed Towhees are not found on the west slope of the Sierra at all!

### A Unique Towhee

Green-tailed Towhees are the only entirely migratory towhee, which means that there are no resident year-round populations anywhere. In the winter (starting in September and October), Green-tailed Towhees can be found in western Texas, the far southern regions of Arizona and New Mexico, and down into Mexico. In April and May, spring migrants can be seen in California, and they are present in their breeding grounds of the high mountain plateaus (average elevation of 7200 ft.) of the southwest United States from May to September. Most of this range encompasses the Great Basin, including Mono Lake on the western edge. Why do Green-tailed Towhees like the Great Basin specifically? Because they prefer to nest and feed in dry, shrubby hillsides and in sagebrush. Read on....

### Life Down Low

Almost all of the activities of a Green-tailed Towhee are ground-centered, under the cover of shrubs and bushes. Green-tailed Towhees always nest on or close to the ground, usually no farther up in the vegetation than about two feet. They also look for food on the ground—employing a characteristic foraging behavior used by all towhees called *double scratching*. The towhee kicks backward rapidly, executed simultaneously with both feet. This rakes the ground to expose food items. A good way to detect towhees is by the loud noises they make rustling leaves on the ground as they forage. Green-tailed Towhees primarily eat insects and their larvae and seeds, and occasionally fruit. One of the only times you’ll see a Green-tailed Towhee out from underneath the brush is when a male is defending his territory or trying to attract a mate by singing from a prominent spot, often on a raised perch on top of a bush.

### **Rodent or Bird?**

Have you seen a chipmunk scurry away from you under the bushes while you've been at the Mono Basin? Next time, look closely: it may not actually be a rodent at all! A Green-tailed Towhee, when flushed from its nest, will often drop to the ground without opening its wings. Then, with the tail elevated over its back (much like a chipmunk), it will run away rapidly at an even speed. It is believed that this "rodent run" behavior is for nest defense: most likely, it is difficult for coyotes and other nest predators to distinguish between a fleeing towhee and a chipmunk (as it is for humans), and therefore they will be lured away after this "scurrying rodent" instead of searching for the nest.

### **Sagebrush Losses**

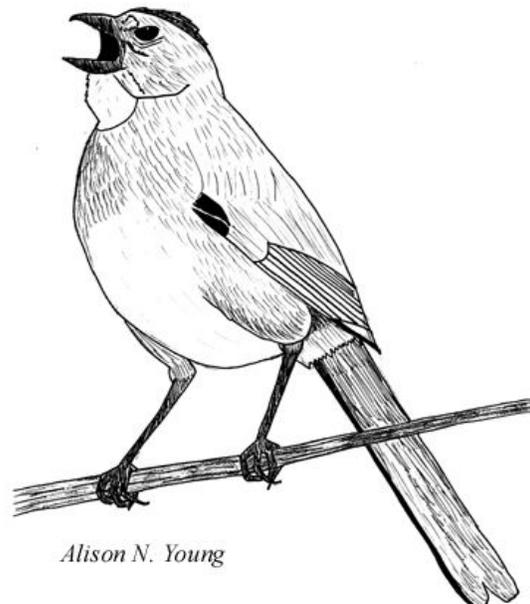
Unfortunately, there are threats to the Green-tailed Towhee's habitat. In sagebrush regions, land conversion to cultivated croplands, development, and seeding with non-native grasses followed with high-intensity grazing is reducing suitable habitat for Green-tailed Towhees and other sagebrush birds. More research on Green-tailed Towhees is needed, as there is no information on the effects of pesticides, which are often applied to these converted lands. Also, fire suppression is detrimental, as towhees can benefit from post-fire regeneration into brushland.

### **Where to Find Green-tailed Towhees Around Mono Lake**

As stated, Green-tailed Towhees are attracted to the Mono Basin for its sagebrush habitat. While they do spend most of their time beneath the cover of the bushes, anywhere in the sagebrush above Mono Lake is a possible Green-tailed Towhee viewing location. Green-tailed Towhees have been spotted at County Park, along the Lee Vining Creek trail, and at the South Tufa area, where they can be seen running between the shrubs and occasionally singing from perches.

### **Green-tailed Towhee Characteristics**

- ✦ Rufous (red) cap
- ✦ Gray head and breast contrasting with white throat patch
- ✦ White lores (the space below the eyes and above the bill)
- ✦ Dark "moustache" stripe
- ✦ Olive green above
- ✦ Yellow wing and tail linings
- ✦ White belly
- ✦ Smaller than other towhees (about 7 inches in length)
- ✦ Song is a loud series of slurred notes and short buzzy trills; call is a short nasal "mew" that sounds like a cat



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