

## Acadian Flycatcher *Empidonax virescens*



**Folk Name:** Green-crested Flycatcher, Gnat King

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Fairly Common

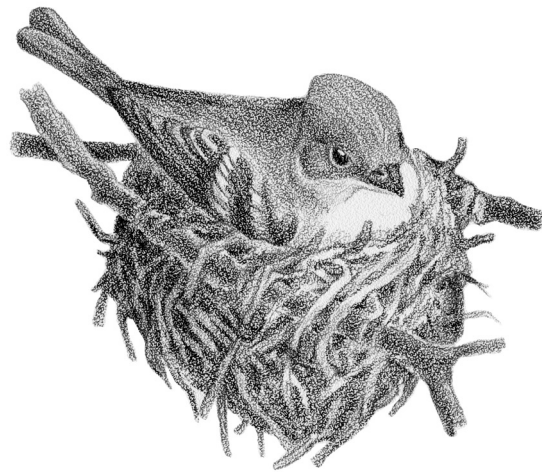
**Habitat:** Streamside deciduous forest, floodplain forest, and bottomland hardwoods

The Acadian Flycatcher is the only species of *Empidonax* flycatcher that regularly breeds in our region. Its call has been described as a sharp and distinctive *PEET-sah*, and each spring this sound is a harbinger of the breeding season for many local birders. Acadian Flycatchers are found during spring and summer scattered along most of the stream and creek floodplains in our larger forested areas. To locate one, find a well-shaded, slow-moving stream corridor in the midst of a large patch of forest. Listen for the bird to call, then move slowly through the forest watching the small trees in the understory. The Acadian Flycatcher will usually be seen fly-catching from a perch close by the stream about 10–40 feet above the ground.

This tiny olive-backed or “green-crested” flycatcher is a neotropical migrant that spends most of the winter between Mexico and Panama, returning here each spring to nest. It has been found in all parts of the Carolina Piedmont, generally arriving in late April and leaving by September. There are several records of its presence in the region prior to World War II. R.B. McLaughlin recorded the arrival date of the Acadian Flycatcher in Statesville as 18 April in 1887 and 24 April in 1888. J.L. Peters reported the Acadian Flycatcher to be “fairly common in all moist woods or wooded streams” near Kings Mountain during the June 1916 nesting season. Charlie Sellers recorded Acadian Flycatchers in Statesville on 2 May in 1941, described them as a common breeding bird around



Acadian Flycatcher at Ribbonwalk Nature Preserve.  
(Jeff Lemons)



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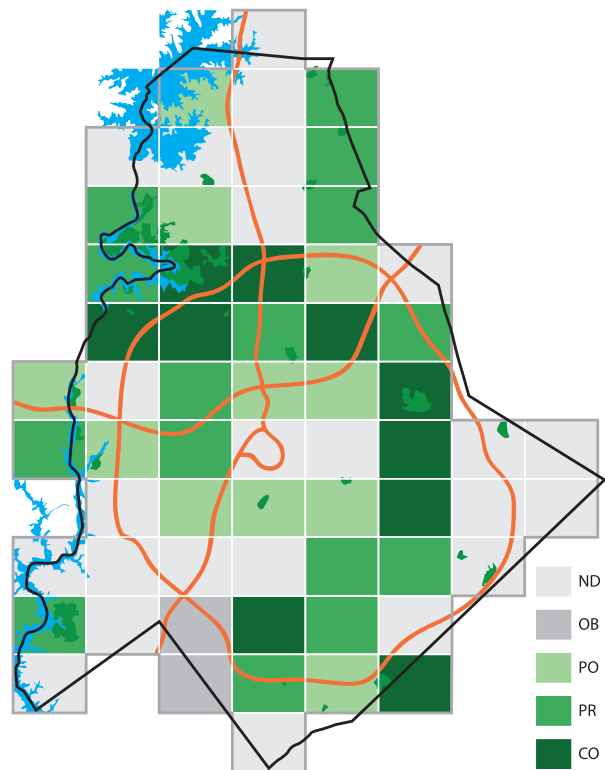
Charlotte, and noted they usually departed the region by the end of August. Like other flycatchers, the Acadian generally remains silent after breeding season is over, and it can be difficult to identify in late summer or fall without hearing a call.

William McIlwaine was the first to describe the nest of the Acadian Flycatcher in the region. He located a pair of Acadian Flycatchers building their characteristically sparse nest in Charlotte on May 19, 1931. He found it “in deep woods near water...close to a little brook” and described it as being about 12 feet high, “small, shallow, easily seen through.” McIlwaine returned later and discovered “three little whitish eggs,” ovate in shape, “with dark spots on the larger end.”

Rhett Chamberlain, an accomplished engineer as well as an ornithologist, published two unique accounts of Acadian Flycatchers he observed in the Town of Matthews, NC, during the 1950s. The first dealt with the acoustical source of the mysterious “flight song” of this bird, a song which he had heard for several consecutive summers. In 1810, ornithologist Alexander Wilson had first described this strange sound comparing it to “the twitterings of chickens nestling under the wings of the hen,” and many ornithologists of the period believed it to be a “wing whistle.” Chamberlain stressed that it was not a wing whistle at all but a vocal call as some others had suggested. He reported hearing the bird make the call “clearly over distances in the order of 50–75 feet,” and he observed that the “sounds continue, at least briefly, after the bird settles on its perch.” He also noted that he only heard this call when the bird was entirely “surprised” and later concluded he still had “a lot to learn about the flight song of this little *Empidonax*, or Gnat-king.”

Chamberlain's second report was about the nest built by the Acadian Flycatcher, which many observers consider to appear "flimsy" or inadequate. He prepared a detailed three-page summary regarding the construction materials and the "load-displacement relationship" of a nest he found on his property, and he calculated a Safety Factor for it. A Safety Factor is a numerical assessment of the load-carrying capacity of a system—in this case, the nest—to handle stress beyond the expected load—in this case, the eggs. He collected his test nest on June 2, 1956, from the branches of a small beech tree on the bank of a narrow stream in Matthews. Chamberlain's testing concluded that the strength of the nest was more than adequate, and when compared to the nest of a Yellow-throated Vireo, the flycatcher "attained a safe nest with one-third by weight of the vireo's nest" and therefore "must be judged the better structural engineer."

At one time, the Acadian Flycatcher ranked as one of the top 50 species recorded on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count, but in recent years it has declined from its 46th spot to the 76th most common bird recorded each spring. Rapid development leading to habitat loss and forest fragmentation along stream corridors appears to be the likely cause of this decline.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Fairly Widespread (PR/15, CO/10)*