

Alder Flycatcher *Empidonax alnorum*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Exposed or dead branches in trees or shrub thickets

The Alder Flycatcher is a very rare migrant in the Carolina Piedmont. This flycatcher nests primarily in the far northern United States and Canada, but there is a small breeding population scattered at high elevation sites in the mountains of North Carolina. This population expanded its range in the mid-1980s, and breeding is now suspected at multiple sites along the Blue Ridge Parkway, in the Pisgah National Forest, in Watauga County, Ashe County, Avery County, northwest Burke County, and around Roan Mountain.

The Alder Flycatcher and the Willow Flycatcher are very closely related, and the two are nearly identical in appearance, but their calls are different. For many years, the two species were considered to be a single species called "Traill's" Flycatcher. [See Willow Flycatcher] There are almost a dozen reports of Alder Flycatcher in the Central Carolina region. One report is supported by a specimen. Two reports are supported by photographs and a description of the bird's call. Two reports are supported by an audio recording. Five others are sight reports where each observer also reported hearing the bird sing.

On October 11, 1979, Dick Brown collected a specimen of an unknown *Empidonax* flycatcher at the base of one of Charlotte's television towers. The bird had hit the tower or a guy wire while moving south at night during fall migration. Brown and his students later examined and carefully measured the bird in his zoology lab at UNC Charlotte. They identified the specimen as an Alder Flycatcher, the first ever confirmed in Mecklenburg County, and Brown added this unique specimen to the University's zoological collection.

A decade later, David Wright photographed a late Alder Flycatcher near his office at University Research Park in Charlotte on September 29, 1989. He was lucky to hear the bird calling so he could make a positive identification. He described it as making its characteristic *pip* or *peep* call. On 10 October, just over a week later, he heard another one calling in the same general area. It is possible this may have been the same bird.



Sightings of Alder Flycatchers were reported from Evergreen Nature Preserve in Charlotte on September 23, 1999, Glenn Hilton Park in Catawba County on September 5, 2002, Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on May 4, 2005, and McDowell Nature Preserve on May 14, 2013. Kevin Metcalf submitted the latter report and provided this phonetic description of the call he heard: a buzzy, raspy *wreap-PEer* with an emphasis on the second syllable. On May 13, 2015, Josh Adams, a Seattle birder temporarily in Charlotte, submitted a report of an Alder Flycatcher he found at the small pond at the McDowell Nature Preserve prairie restoration site. This was precisely the location Kevin Metcalf reported his Alder Flycatcher at two years earlier. Adams posted a recording of the bird online on 14 May to help clinch the identification. Ken Kneidel recorded an Alder Flycatcher at Moss Creek Nature Trail in Cabarrus County on May 14, 2017. Chris Talkington and Rob Gilson confirmed an Alder Flycatcher at McDowell Nature Preserve on May 16, 2017, providing our latest spring report.

The remaining report is from the edge of the region and is now the second accepted sighting of an Alder Flycatcher in the state of South Carolina. Dennis Forsythe and Irvin Pitts observed, photographed, and heard the vocalizations of an Alder Flycatcher at the Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge in Chesterfield County, SC, on August 26, 2013. The species had been first confirmed in South Carolina only four years earlier at a banding station on Folly Island.