

## Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*



**Folk Name:** Bee Martin, Bee-bird, Bee Betty

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Uncommon to Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Open areas, fences, wires, snags

The Eastern Kingbird is a breeding resident of open areas and field habitat throughout the Carolina Piedmont. At a length of 8 ½ inches, it is our largest regularly breeding flycatcher. The Kingbird is easy to identify with its black head, gray back, white underparts, and white tail band. At one time, this bird was so common around local farms, ponds, open woodlands, and orchards, that it was well known to almost all local citizens. In these early years, most people called it the “Bee Martin,” and like many of our other tyrant flycatchers, it was recognized for its dramatic antics defending its nest. One local newspaper went so far as to describe the Eastern Kingbird as “the incarnation of pluck.”

Atop the Eastern Kingbird’s head is a distinguishing field mark that few observers ever see. It is a hidden crest of orange and red. A folktale shared by one Charlotte resident in 1877 provides us with one interesting idea about why the kingbird may have this colorful crown: “There is something about a common bee martin that we don’t suppose many persons have noticed. Our attention was called to it by Col H C Jones of Charlotte. It has a good representation of a flower under the feathers, on top of the head. When it wishes to catch a bee it exhibits this flower and thus entices its prey.”

In June 1926, William McIlwaine provided this account of his attempt to photograph an Eastern Kingbird nest he found in Charlotte:

In a large field covered with broomstraw and weeds, and thinly dotted with small trees I found a nest of



*Eastern Kingbird nest at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge. (MCPRD staff)*



J F M A M J J A S O N D

a Kingbird. It is a slovenly structure, ragged and dirty looking. Materials—paper, grass, weeds, weed burrs, etc. It was placed half-way out on a one-inch limb of a small sweet gum tree. About 12 ft. up. Three little birds with big mouths open, they were half naked, with gray fuz [*sic*] partly covering them.

I managed to climb up in this little tree guess at the distance, and take a snap shot. Then I realized I had left off my portrait attachment, and the focus was all wrong. So with prolongation of a strained position I had to get the attachment on, and then take another picture. I fear I was not still enough for the picture to be a success. But such are the experiences of the amateur photographer. I can almost always remember two details; but there is a third that eludes me, to spoil the picture.

I was rather disappointed at the attitude of the parent birds. They flew from tree-top to tree-top, calling and protesting; but they did not attack me. Knowing their brave little hearts, I was rather expecting they would. ...When I first saw her, the mother bird was sitting over the little ones. I suppose this was because the nest is open to the sun, which is very hot now.

He noted that “the little ones rejoiced in the shadow of her wings.”

Later, McIlwaine’s family witnessed the legendary Eastern Kingbird’s courage while on a road trip out of Charlotte:

Some months ago I was driving to Virginia with my family. A large hawk flew across the road followed by three small birds. I called to my wife to notice the hawk. In a moment she was crying, Look! look! look! He is on his back! He is on his back! He is pecking him on his head! “Oh! Oh!”...I have heard

of that, though never seen it. The kingbird, our little Bee martin will fight a hawk that way. I did not see it this time; I was making forty-five miles or better. But I know that feathered Bucephalus was flashing his best speed. No wonder this little kingbird is catalogued in the books as “Tyrannus tyrannus.”

Local birders can still see the kingbird in action in the Piedmont today. On June 24, 2012, the author watched a pair of Eastern Kingbirds perched in a tall willow at the edge of a small pond at Buffalo Creek Preserve in eastern Cabarrus County. A Green Heron flew up towards the willow and attempted to land on it. As soon as the heron alighted, it was attacked repeatedly and unrelentingly by each kingbird, taking turns. At one point, the author was able to observe yellow-red on the raised crown of one of the birds. The heron finally gave a resounding *crawwwk* in surrender, and flew away as quickly as it could. Presumably, this pair of kingbirds had a nest very nearby. At 18 inches the Green Heron is over twice the size of the average Eastern Kingbird.

Each fall the Eastern Kingbird flies south to spend the winter in South America, with some making their way as far south as Argentina. In spring, they return, arriving in the region as early as the last week of March. After breeding season, most depart by the end of September. Reports in the region from October 28, 2011 (Mecklenburg), January 4, 1998 (Anson), and January 20, 2016 (York), are believed to be cases of misidentification.

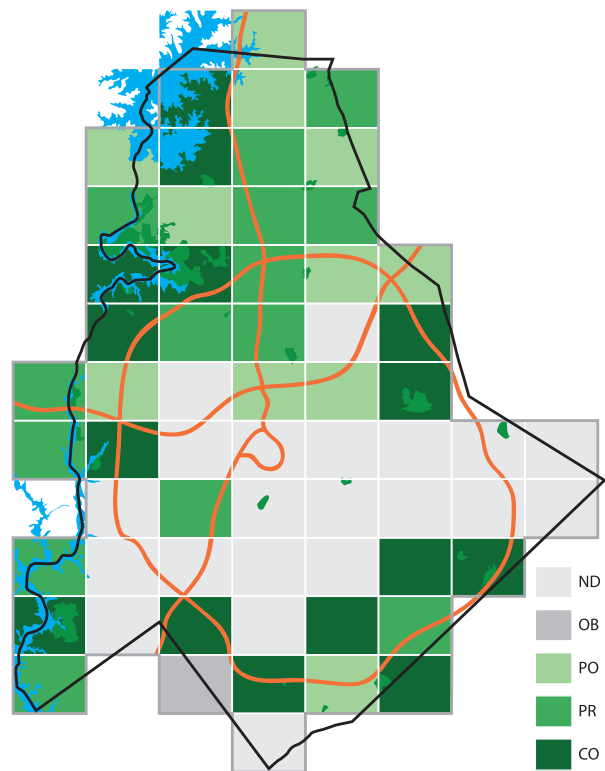
Like many of our insectivores, the population of the Eastern Kingbird has been in decline over the past four decades. Much of this is due to the continued loss or degradation of prime nesting habitat and agricultural pesticides are an increasing threat as well. Breeding Bird Survey trends in both North and South Carolina indicate a fairly steep decline of Eastern Kingbird populations in both states. However, the Eastern Kingbird is hanging on as one of the top 50 birds recorded on Charlotte Spring Bird Counts dropping from 45th (with approximately 0.4 birds seen per party-hour) during the first 20 years surveyed to 48th (with about 0.33 birds per party-hour) in the most recent 20 years of the survey.

Listed below are examples of the results of five nest attempts by Eastern Kingbirds at the McDowell Nature Preserve in Mecklenburg County during the summer of 2004. These are provided to help illustrate the challenges

that the Eastern Kingbird must face each nesting season:

- 1) A nest with three eggs, built in a hackberry tree in late May, successfully fledged two young about two weeks after hatching.
- 2) A nest with one egg, built in a sycamore sapling, was found destroyed, and the egg depredated on 3 June by an unknown predator.
- 3) One nest with three eggs fledged two young by 12 July.
- 4) A nest with one egg was depredated. A snake was the suspected culprit as the nest appeared undisturbed.
- 5) A nest was built but was then abandoned.

In summary, out of five nest attempts made by what were believed to be at least four different pairs of kingbirds, only four young successfully fledged.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Fairly Widespread (PR/14, CO/15)*