

Eastern Wood-Pewee *Contopus virens*



Folk Name: Dead-limb Bird, Parvee

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Exposed limb, often on a snag tree in an upland, usually open, woodland or woodlot of pines or hardwoods

The Eastern Wood-Pewee is a small and generally inconspicuous bird, but it is perhaps our quintessential “flycatcher,” as it is most often seen when it darts out from an open perch—often a dead limb—expertly catches an insect, and then quickly returns to its perch. T. Gilbert Pearson watched one bird near Greensboro repeat this process over and over, catching 36 insects in 5 minutes. This bird prefers mature, upland forest habitat, but it is also found in wooded residential areas.

It was once one of the most common species of flycatcher breeding in our region, but today its breeding population has been significantly reduced, due in part to expanding urban development throughout the Piedmont. Breeding Bird Survey trends in both North and South Carolina indicate steep declines of Wood-Pewee populations in both states. It was one of the top 50 birds recorded on Charlotte Spring Bird Counts during the first 20 year assessment with approximately 0.3 birds seen per party-hour. The count average for the most recent 20 year assessment has declined to approximately 0.16 per party-hour.

One of our earliest records of this species comes from a set of eggs collected from a nest in the city of Charlotte in the summer of 1892. The eggs were sold to an oologist (egg collector) and placed in a private collection. Later, the



Eastern Wood-Pewee. (Jeff Lemons)



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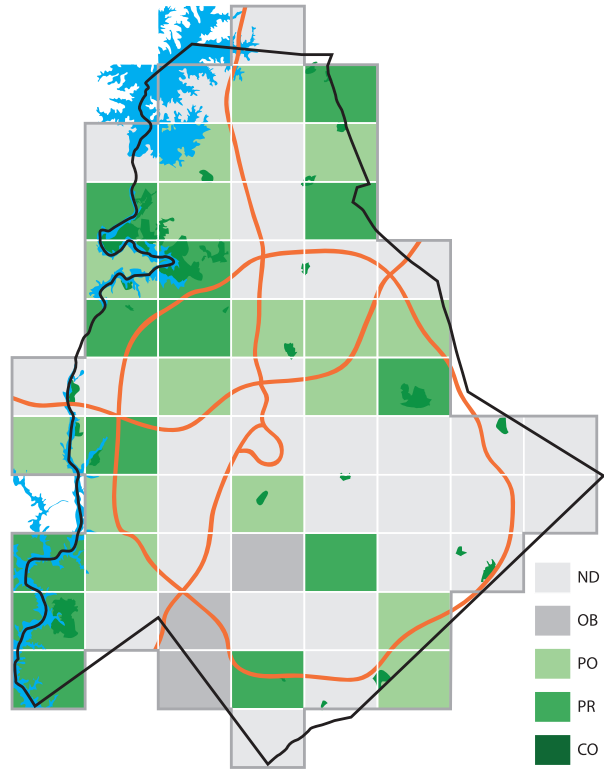
collection of eggs was sold to a museum and was stored for many years at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City. Ultimately, these Eastern Wood-Pewee eggs became part of a larger regional collection which is now housed at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Camarillo, California.

The Eastern Wood-Pewee is a neotropical migrant that winters in northwest South America. R.B. McLaughlin recorded the spring arrival of the Wood-Pewee in Statesville as averaging around 23 or 24 April in the late 1800s. Elmer Brown reported finding one in Salisbury on May 3, 1922. William McIlwaine rejoiced at hearing the call of the Eastern Wood-Pewee having returned to Charlotte during the first week of May in 1928: “And through the woods this week comes the sweet, plaintive call, ‘pee-a-wee—pee-a-wee—pee-a-wee.’” Today, there are records of the Wood-Pewee arriving in the region by the first week of April and they have now been recorded staying as late as the last week of October. One was banded October 5, 2001. We also have one report of a bird seen on 2 November in 2002, although fall birds can be a challenge to accurately identify. In fall, the Eastern Wood-Pewee can best be distinguished from other “empids” by its lack of eye ring, peaked crown, relatively long wing primaries, and narrow wing bars, also, the appearance of a “vest” may be indicative as well.

The nest of the Eastern Wood-Pewee can be difficult to see as the birds often use lichen on the outside, which makes it well camouflaged. W.G. Templeton shared the details of an Eastern Wood-Pewee building a nest on the side of a hill in Iredell County on June 23, 1942. The nest was placed on a tree on a steep hillside with one side 35 feet off the ground and only 8 feet up on the other. He watched the bird fly “directly into a cobweb, smearing its breast and wings with the sticky substance, and then back she would come to this same spot, roll and rub its breast and wings all over the foundation she was preparing to build on.” Templeton visited the nest every day for almost

2 months. The bird laid one egg on 4 July and a second one on 9 July. One egg hatched on 19 July and one on 20 July. Both birds successfully fledged about 3 August and were fed by the adults until 11 August. Templeton found seven other Wood-Pewee nests that summer and each had two eggs.

No actual nests of the Wood-Pewee were confirmed during the Mecklenburg County BBA, but observers recorded the species as Probable in 13 blocks. There are two historic accounts of nesting in Mecklenburg County. Elizabeth Clarkson reported the Eastern Wood-Pewee as occasionally visiting her garden at Wing Haven in Charlotte during the summer of 1943 and stated they “evidently have nests near-by,” but she never was able to locate one. Archie D. Shaftesbury watched a pair feeding young on the campus of Davidson College, late in the breeding season, from August 19–22, 1944. The adults fed two young birds several times each day, and both young were able to fly.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/13, CO/0)