

## Great Crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus crinitus*



**Folk Name:** Daybreak, Dead-limb Bird

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Open woodlands and wooded groves, trees in residential areas with nest cavities

The Great Crested Flycatcher gets its name from its “top-knot,” the crest of feathers on its head that is raised when it gets excited. At 8 inches, this bird is just half an inch smaller than the Eastern Kingbird, our largest regularly occurring flycatcher. The Great Crested Flycatcher is easily recognizable as it has a loud call that sounds like *Vreeeep!* or *Wheeeep!* which can be heard echoing in spring in most wooded neighborhoods throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is unique in that it is our only member of the Tyrannidae family that builds its nests in cavities.

Like most of our other flycatchers, the Great Crested is a long-distance migrant. It breeds throughout our region, but spends each winter far to our south. Wintering sites include southern Florida, southern Mexico, and northwestern South America, but most of these birds winter in Central America. Each spring, these flycatchers head north to return to their breeding grounds.

There are many early accounts of this flycatcher. Our earliest voucher specimen of the Great Crested Flycatcher is a set of eggs collected from a nest in the city of Charlotte during the summer of 1893. This egg set ultimately became part of collection housed at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Camarillo, California, where it is available for examination today.

Leverett Loomis reported the Great Crested Flycatcher as being “abundant” during migration and “very



*Great Crested Flycatcher. (Jeff Lemons)*



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

common” in summer in Chester during the 1870s. In the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin recorded the spring arrival date of Great Crested Flycatcher in Statesville as between 9 April and 14 April. Elmer Brown recorded their arrival in Salisbury on April 7, 1923. H. Lee Jones recorded the first arrival of a Great Crested Flycatcher in Charlotte on 14 April in 1964. A review of several hundred reports since 1995 indicates most still arrive around the second week of April.

Males begin calling immediately upon arrival and nesting territories are soon established. Nests are built in holes in trees or other cavities including man-made ones. Great Crested Flycatchers are secondary cavity-nesters, meaning they don’t excavate their own hole, but use a natural tree cavity or a hole excavated by a woodpecker. They line their cavity with a variety of soft plant material like grass and pine needles, feathers, fur, fine twigs, strips of thin bark, or bits of paper or trash. A piece of snakeskin is also mentioned in virtually every general account of the nest materials of this flycatcher. According to recent research, the further you move north, the less often snakeskin is present. In Florida it is used almost 100% of the time, but in New England it may be found in 75% or fewer of this bird’s nests.

“The kingbird is back again, and the great crested flycatcher. This latter is the bird that for some mysterious reason weaves into its nest a piece of snake’s skin. I remember telling this strange trait to a very bright and attractive young lady with whom I was associated in a summer conference at Davidson College. She was very much interested, though a bit incredulous. But of course she tried to hide her doubts. The next day I told her I had located a nest of this bird in a hollow where I could get to it. After reaching it I rather avoided my skeptical young lady. But she was after a report, and she cornered me. ‘Oh Mr. McIlwaine,

did that nest have its snake skin? And I had to answer, No ma'am. And she smiled. But the books say they do almost invariably.”

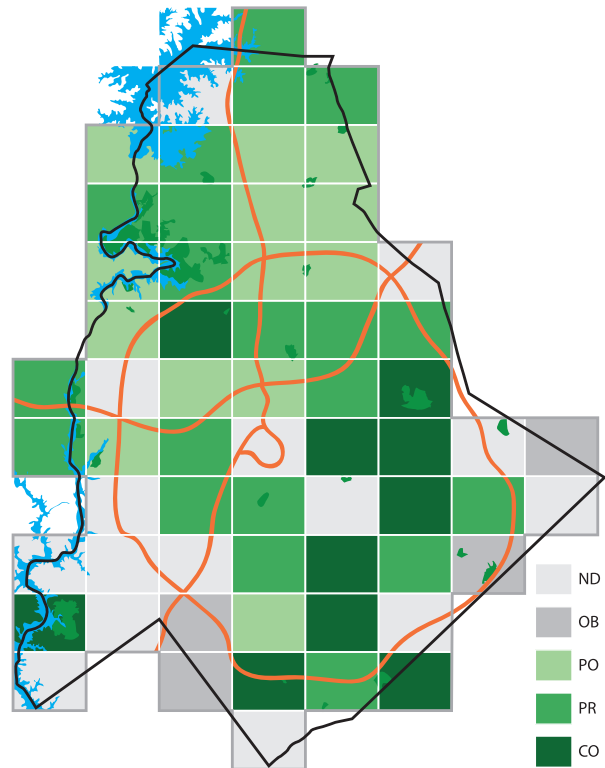
—William McIlwaine, May 2, 1928

Nest cavities are a very limited resource in many locations and birds and other animals often must compete for them. Breeding Bird Survey trend data show a fairly stable breeding population of the Great Crested Flycatcher in the Carolinas, although competition with the non-native European Starling and other animals is certainly a factor that impacts local breeding success. Frank Ramsey, age 13, published this nest account from Charlotte in 1959:

Mr. Norwood wanted me to tell you about the Crested Flycatchers I had nesting in my Flicker box. At first, I found it hard to believe that I had a Crested Flycatcher in my box, but I did! When they had two eggs in the nest, a bunch of Starlings chased them out and destroyed the nest. I guess that available holes were not common, so they built again in the same box. Again the Starlings tore the nest up, and this time they didn't come back. I was sorry to see them go, as they are interesting birds to watch and I missed a possible chance of taking some color slides of them.

Recent nesting locations include: a nest that staff found in a rectangular opening in a crossbeam of a steel gate at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge; a nest in a newspaper box that Sue Gardner discovered in Gaston County; and a nest in a nest box installed about 12 feet off the ground on the side of an oak tree in front of the Mecklenburg

County Conservation Science Office. Within 2 days of this nest's completion, it was destroyed by a gray squirrel, which chased the birds away. Each of these nests were active during the month of May.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Fairly Widespread (PR/20, CO/10)*