

## Willow Flycatcher *Empidonax traillii*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Migrant and sporadic Breeder

**Abundance:** Very Rare to Uncommon

**Habitat:** Shrubby thickets near ponds or along stream corridors

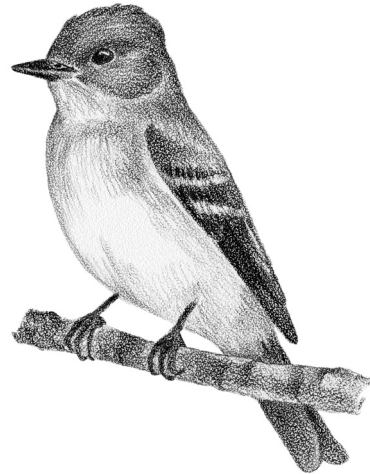
For many years, Willow and Alder Flycatchers were considered as a single species known as the “Traill’s” Flycatcher. After a great deal of study, taxonomists determined the two were actually separate species, and they were officially split in 1973. Though almost identical in appearance, each bird has a distinctly different song, and their call notes differ as well. Therefore, it is important to hear the bird vocalize to help ensure accurate identification. The song of the Willow Flycatcher is often described phonetically as *FITZ-bew*, while the Alder’s song sounds like a descending *fee-bee-o*. Fall migrants are nearly impossible to identify, except in hand, as they usually remain silent.

The Willow Flycatcher breeds primarily north of Virginia and in some areas along the Appalachian Mountains and Foothills. However, some breeding has been documented in the Piedmont of North and South Carolina as well. The earliest confirmation of breeding in the Carolinas comes from Iredell County. R.B. McLaughlin collected a set of three eggs from a “Traill’s” (Willow) Flycatcher nest he discovered in Statesville on May 18, 1886. It appears this breeding record was unknown to the authors of *Birds of North Carolina*. These eggs are currently housed in the National Museum of Natural History collection at the Smithsonian Institution and are available for examination.

Breeding was not confirmed again in the Carolinas for almost 70 years. In the 1950s, a breeding site was found near North Wilkesboro, but an actual nest was not confirmed there until 1965. This small nesting area was later lost to development. By 1975, a small nesting colony found near Raleigh was the only one known in the state.

In the 1980s, the Willow Flycatcher began to spread sporadically southward. Nesting was suspected at several sites in the northwestern Piedmont and in Winston-Salem. In 1991, Simon Thompson located “five singing males on 9 June” near Landrum in northern Spartanburg County, and a nest was found along the Pacolet River, thus documenting the first breeding site ever confirmed in South Carolina. Today, this flycatcher has been found during breeding season at several sites across the Central Carolina region.

Below are some of the nesting reports documented here since the turn of the twenty-first century. In 2001, several UNC Charlotte students, who were monitoring



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the filling of the new Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County, reported Willow Flycatchers present at the north end of the lake throughout the breeding season. In early June 2002, Danny Swicegood found two singing males there, and an adult feeding two young was seen there during the last week of June, providing the first confirmation of local breeding in the Central Carolinas since 1886. During the summer of 2004, Sudie Daves, a biologist with the MCPRD, confirmed a pair of Willow Flycatchers nesting at the Renaissance Golf Course in Charlotte. Several birders later visited this breeding site as finding this bird was quite easy. All one had to do was to drive along the club’s service road to hole number 6 and sit in the car and wait. The male would soon pop up on top of a shrub and begin calling.

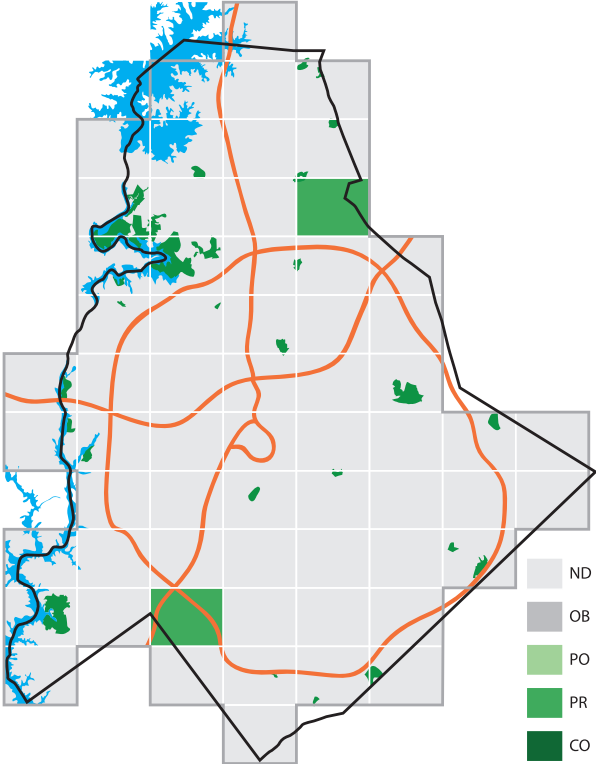
Willow Flycatchers were reported singing along Shimpock Road at Lake Don T. Howell again on 15 June and 28 June in 2004 and also during nesting season in 2006 from 16 May to 22 June. These birds are believed to have nested. On May 24, 2006, Alan Kneidel discovered a pair at a wetland across from Concord Mills Mall in Cabarrus County. It appeared these birds nested in the wetland that season, and Willow Flycatchers were relocated there during nesting season for at least the next four years. One Willow Flycatcher was discovered by Judy Walker at the McDowell Prairie in southwest Charlotte during the last week of May 2005. The bird remained there through the month of June, and nesting was suspected. A Willow Flycatcher was found there again during breeding season in both June 2007 and June 2009.

Most Willow Flycatchers sighted here are migrants moving through each spring and fall. They are often found “late” in spring. Observers first began to report the Willow Flycatcher in migration in the Central Carolina region in

the 1980s. On May 4, 1985, Dave Frech reported finding Mecklenburg County’s first Willow Flycatcher. Frech was able to identify it after hearing its characteristic *FITZ-bew* song. He was helping out with the Charlotte Spring Bird Count at the time, and this flycatcher was designated the highlight of that year’s count. Bill Hilton Jr. mist-netted, carefully measured, banded, and released three Willow Flycatchers moving through York County on May 13, 17, and 24, 1991. Reports of Willow Flycatchers have increased over the past two decades.

Over 50 reports have been received since 2000 and reports are on file from all counties in the region except Lincoln, Stanly, and Chester. Willow Flycatchers have also been reported during migration in counties on the edge the region including Spartanburg, Cherokee, Union, Chesterfield, and Kershaw County in South Carolina and Montgomery, Davie, and Alexander County in North Carolina. Most spring sightings have been recorded in May with the earliest being reported on 30 April. The latest date for the region was a bird reported by David Wright on 27 September in 1995 at McAlpine Greenway in Charlotte.

The Willow Flycatcher has been placed on the state Watch List in North Carolina because its breeding population is rare to uncommon and is considered vulnerable.



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**

*Very Local (PR/2, CO/0)*