

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher *Empidonax flaviventris*



Folk Name: (none)

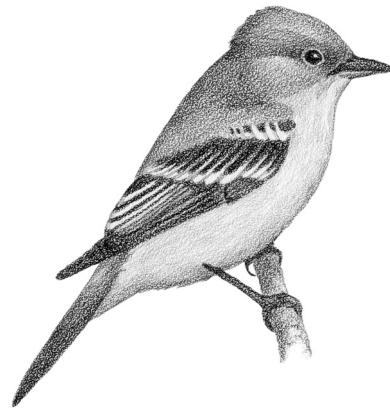
Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare in spring and Rare to Uncommon in fall

Habitat: Usually observed closer to the ground than its congeners—often in small trees along streams or in brushy willow thickets

Today, the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is known as a rare to uncommon fall migrant in the Carolina Piedmont and a very rare visitor in the spring. However, this was not always the case. The presence of this migrant in the Carolinas in fall appears to have been missed for many years. The first specimen of the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher collected in North Carolina was taken in Buncombe County on August 11, 1890, but by World War II—a half century later—there had only been five more specimens taken (all during the fall) in the state. C.S. Brimley, with the North Carolina State Museum, noted that the likely reason was that this bird “is invariably quiet and inconspicuous, and so similar in appearance to the other small flycatchers that it undoubtedly has been overlooked.” It was also overlooked in South Carolina. In fact, the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was not even officially placed on the South Carolina bird list until specimens were finally collected in the mid-1980s and a report published in 1987. Many early sight records of this *Empidonax* species were not considered acceptable. Reports of birds that were both seen and heard were considered more acceptable, but like most of its relatives, this bird seldom calls after the breeding season.

There have been about 50 reports of the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in the Central Carolinas since 1957 and almost 40 of these have been reported since 2000. It is possible that this is because birders have become more sophisticated in differentiating the various *Empidonax* species, and they are working harder at doing it. One sighting is supported by a specimen, two were banded, and thanks to the convenience of digital photography, a few recent sightings have been supported by photographs. Dick Brown recovered a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher at the base of the WRET television tower in Charlotte on September 12, 1977, providing the only voucher specimen known from the region. Two Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were captured and banded by Bill Hilton Jr. in York County in



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1994, and since 2010, this bird has been photographed at least twice in Mecklenburg County and once in the Uwharrie National Forest.

Forty-five (90%) of the 50 reports were recorded in the fall between 5 September and 3 October. Sight reports in fall have been received from Mecklenburg, Gaston, Catawba, Alexander, York, Kershaw, and Lancaster counties. The average fall date reported in the region is 18 September. Reports from recent years have provided more specific identification details like the presence of a “nice” or “yellowish prominent” eye-ring, clear wing bars, “orangish lower mandible” or mandible “exceptionally light,” “yellow color throat to vent,” etc. Tail- and wing-flicking behavior was also noted in a few reports. Fall birds were noted vocalizing in only five reports. One was described as singing a “Chu-ee” song, and another was reported “singing loudly in a tree” beside the Nation Ford Greenway trail in Lancaster County on October 1, 2011.

There are five reports of the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher from the spring season. One reported on April 7, 1957, seems questionable as the last week of April was considered a very early arrival for the species at that time. Two flycatchers were reported seen in Charlotte on one day in mid-May that same year. The remaining three spring reports are more recent: April 30, 1989; May 9, 1999; and April 17, 2015. Arrival dates in April are being more commonly reported today.

It is interesting to note that at least one Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was found at Ribbonwalk Nature Preserve in Charlotte each September from 2009 through 2017.