

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers Nesting in North Carolina

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On June 1, 2000, at about 5:30 p.m., Eric Olsen was driving on the private road leading to Friendly Ridge Farm in southern Union County, North Carolina, approximately 5 miles south of Monroe off Wolf Pond Road. He spotted two birds flying beside his vehicle as he drove up the hill. He got a good look at one of the birds. It had an extremely long tail that was split in a V shape. It was pale gray on the back, and it had dark wings, a salmon pink color under the wings, and a spot of red color at the shoulder. The other bird had a shorter tail but was not seen clearly. Although it seemed certain that this was a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*), it was 5 days before the identification could be confirmed by Blayne and Anne Olsen.

On June 6, B. Olsen saw two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers as he was driving up the farm's road. They were sitting on the top wire of a fence and flew to a small grove of Chinaberry (*Melia azedarach*) trees in the center of the pasture. The Olsens were able to observe the birds for about 10 minutes using 10x binoculars and a 60x spotting scope. Both Olsens clearly saw the gray color on the backs, the dark wings, the salmon pink color under the wings, the spot of



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher near Monroe, NC, July 15, 2000. Photo by Mary Welty, Denver, NC.

red at the shoulder, and the characteristic long scissor-like tail. The male's tail was significantly longer than the body. The female had a shorter tail, about body length. After about 10 minutes, the birds took off and flew to the top of a high-tension power line tower (the "tower") and could not be seen.

On June 7, A. Olsen spotted the beginnings of a nest. It was in the northwest leg of the tower where several crossbars converged. A. Olsen posted the news on the Carolinabirds e-mail list. By June 10 Taylor Piephoff, Harry LeGrand, Will Cook, Judy Walker, Wayne Forsythe, Bob Olthoff, Dwayne and Lori Martin, and others had visited the farm and seen the scissor-taileds. Both Olsens spent most of the morning of June 10 observing the birds. The birds were seen catching insects, visiting the nest, copulating, and sitting on the nest.

The male was seen defending the territory. Its first observed defense occurred at approximately 10 a.m. on June 10 when a Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) flew over the pasture just south of the tower. The male scissor-tailed chased the vulture and dive-bombed it until it was well away from the area. When the vulture was far enough away, the male scissor-tailed flew up in the air, looping and diving. E. Olsen described this as a "victory dance." On other occasions the male was seen chasing off Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), and a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*). On several occasions A. Olsen observed the male flying high up into the air, twisting and turning and swooping down. This was done in the presence of the female as she sat on a low fence.



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and young near the nest on July 15, 2000.
Photo by Mary Welty.

During the next week the female was seen on the nest during the morning hours. On several occasions she was seen copulating with the male. Based on information on the web (Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation 1997) that egg-laying takes place in the morning, it was assumed the female was laying eggs. By June 17 she was spending most of the time sitting on the nest. By June 30 B. Olsen saw the female return to the nest as usual, but this time, instead of settling down, she remained perched on the side with her head cocked as if listening. This behavior suggested that the eggs were about to hatch. On July 4 E. Olsen spotted two young in the nest. On the July 5 he saw three young.

By July 14 four young were grown enough to be seen fairly easily. They had new feathers that were developed enough so that the coloration could be seen to be generally the same as the parents. The tail feathers were only about 1 inch long. On July 15 at 9 a.m. it was evident that the young had fledged. A. Olsen spotted two young in a Willow Oak (*Quercus phellos*) in the cemetery, and a third was spotted in the weeds by the tower. By 7 p.m. two young were in the top of the largest Willow Oak in the cemetery, and one was in a grove of Eastern Redcedar trees (*Juniperus virginiana*) under the tower. The male stayed with the young in the Willow Oak, and the female stayed near the one in the redcedar tree.

During the next week three young were observed together. They stayed close together and could be fairly easily observed. Regular observations were made through July 23. After then the sightings stopped until August 3, when the female and one young were seen at approximately 5:30 p.m. By this time the tail feathers on the young bird were about as long as those on the female. The immature could be distinguished from the female by the thin white edge on the wing feathers.

This is the first report of breeding and successful nesting of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in North Carolina. Previous records list the species as an occasional or rare visitor (Fussell 1994, Potter *et al.* 1980, and Pearson *et al.* 1942). The normal breeding range of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers is in the area from New Mexico to Louisiana and Nebraska southward to Mexico and southern Texas. The habitat around the tower is similar to that in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation 1997). It consists of a mixture of pastures and trees. Some trees are isolated within the pastures, and others are along fence lines. Low fences surround the pastures.

Virginia reported its first nesting for this species in 2000 after a pair fledged young in Culpeper County (Heatwole 2000). South Carolina also has one nesting record, from Laurens County in 1982 (Mancke 1982).

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Common Loon Entangled in Fishing Line on Lake Jocassee, Oconee County, South Carolina

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At about 1900 h on 25 May 2000, we observed a Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) in basic plumage along the shore of a small cove about 500 m south of the Bad Creek Project discharge on Lake Jocassee, Oconee County, South Carolina. About an hour later, we again saw the loon about 100 m from the Bad Creek Project outlet. At this time, Ellenberger and Joye noticed that the loon had monofilament fishing line wrapped around its head and body. The bird, however, appeared to be in good condition and was swimming without trouble. We decided to try to capture the loon from the boat with a large landing net. Joye was able to net the bird on the first try.

We found that line was wound around the wings and feet, with most of the line tightly wrapped around the tongue. The tongue was black and hard anterior to the line and soft and tan posterior to the line. With Joye restraining the loon, Ellenberger and Bowers cut the line with a single-edged knife. We found no hook or line traveling into the loon's throat, and the bird was not emaciated. Except for the injuries to the tongue, the bird appeared to be in good physical condition.

Upon release, the loon swam off at a leisurely pace. We observed the bird for another 30 minutes until dark.

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