

General Field Notes

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General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, or significant nesting records; or summaries of such items. Submit manuscripts to the appropriate state editor.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

First Record of the Western Flycatcher Complex in North Carolina

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On Saturday, 15 January 2000, at approximately 10:45 AM we discovered an *Empidonax* flycatcher sitting on a cable-fence a couple of feet off the ground along a gravel access road to Jordan Lake in Chatham County, NC. We immediately noticed the yellowish underparts and characteristically shaped eye-ring indicating that this bird belonged to the Pacific-slope (*E. difficilis*) / Cordilleran (*E. occidentalis*) group formerly lumped as “Western Flycatcher”. We observed the bird from 30 to 50 feet away in excellent lighting (the sun was to our backs) for nearly 30 minutes as it sat on the cable, hopped down to the grass after insects, flew back to the cable or to a low branch, and worked its way along this sunny roadside edge. The weather was clear with temperatures in the upper 30s and an occasional slight breeze about two days after a strong cold front.

We made several phone calls to birders in the general area, telling them about this first state sighting of “Western Flycatcher”. More important, we

wanted them to bring cameras, taped songs of *Empidonax* flycatchers, and tape recorders to document the record, as we had neither a camera nor blank tape with us. We hoped that photographs or voice recordings could be useful in determining which of the two species was involved, as the bird did not call during our initial observation.

After it consumed a rather large insect, the bird disappeared back into the brush for 20 or 30 minutes before reappearing in the same location and acting with the same behavior for another 30 minutes or so. By this time, Will Cook and Derb Carter drove up, and Carter took several photographs of the bird. After the authors had left, Ricky Davis also arrived. Cook succeeded in recording a vocalization of the bird as it responded to the Pacific-slope Flycatcher song (from the National Geographic Society [1985] tapes) by vigorously calling. It did not respond to the Cordilleran Flycatcher vocalizations on the tape. Thus, Carter, Cook, and Davis at least tentatively identified the bird as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Pippen returned a few days later, heard the bird call, and agreed that the vocalization indicated the bird to be a Pacific-slope Flycatcher.



Figure 1. Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher. Photo by Derb Carter.

The bird was a small flycatcher, noticeably smaller than an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*), which was nearby for comparison, and larger than a nearby Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*). Its head was slightly crested. The bill was fairly broad, blackish above and orangish-flesh below. The mouth interior was orange. It had a pale yellow eye-ring, wider and nearly pointed in back (behind the eye) and very thin above the eye. The eye-ring was widened in front of the eye but was not pointed and not quite as wide as behind the eye. The upperparts were olive, slightly more yellowish/richer around the nape and head. The underparts were pale yellow with a greenish tint and a brighter yellow in the center of the belly. The upper flanks were slightly dingier than the rest of the underparts. The undertail coverts were pale yellowish.

The wings were a dark sooty color. Two buffy/pale yellow wingbars were present, with the upper wingbar being slightly thinner and duller than the lower. The wings were short, with the tip barely reaching the base of the tail and with a short primary projection. The tail was of medium length, appearing long due to the short primary projection of the wing. Observers did not note any tail wagging or flicking of the tail or wings.

The habitat included the margin of a medium-growth mixed pine-hardwood stand with tangles of Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*). The bird spent most of its time along the edge of the woods, but it also fed in sunlit openings just inside the woods. Most of its foraging was at or within 3 feet of ground level.

This flycatcher was seen by dozens of birders over the next week. Carter and several other birders photographed it (Figure 1). It was apparently last reported on 21 January. A very strong storm dumped as much as 20 inches of snow on the region immediately thereafter. Despite much searching, birders could not relocate the flycatcher after the snowfall, and the bird likely succumbed to the storm.

Species in the genus *Empidonax* are notoriously difficult to identify, and most species probably should not be identified by sight alone. The Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Cordilleran Flycatcher are particularly difficult to separate from each other visually, but the “Western Flycatcher” complex can normally be distinguished from all other *Empidonax* species by the tear-drop shape of the eye-ring, which is pointed behind the eye. Only the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*E. flaviventris*) shares with the “Western” the fairly rich yellow underparts, but its yellowish eye-ring is usually circular and thus rounded behind the eye. This species also has a rounder head that typically lacks a peak or slight crest that the “Western” shows. Yellow-bellied also has a smaller, shorter bill and has a sharper wing pattern than does “Western” (Joseph Morlan pers. comm.). The Acadian Flycatcher (*E. virescens*) may show a slight teardrop eye-ring effect and a yellowish throat in the fall, but it is not generally as yellow on the underparts as “Western”, nor does it have the extremely high-pitched call-notes that the “Western” does.

The Cordilleran and Pacific-slope Flycatchers differ slightly in their calls, and more so in their songs. But even so, these differences are somewhat slight, such that a number of Western ornithologists question the decision of the American Ornithologists' Union to consider these as distinct species. The songs might be distinctive; however, the North Carolina bird gave call notes rather than a song. Louis Bevier (in prep.) indicates that the typical Position Note call:

"differs sharply between species [Pacific-slope and Cordilleran] over most of range. Pacific-slope typically gives a single slurred note that briefly rises then falls (occasionally flat or slightly rising) before ending with strongly emphasized component that rises steeply in pitch: su-weep!, peweat! Or pseeyeap!; this call appears as a sinusoidal or ladle-shaped

note on a spectrogram (see Johnson 1980). Some Pacific-slopes may lack beginning component and emphasize only steeply rising portion, this being typical of birds breeding on the Channel Is. off s. California.

"In contrast, Cordilleran gives a distinctly 2 syllable male Position Note with second note higher, wi-SEET! Or pit-SEET! Rare individuals from interior Northwest may give Position Notes of both species (so-called bilingual individuals). Because male Position Note of some Cordillerans from this region may overlap Pacific-slope, identification by call of migrants and vagrants outside known breeding range is problematic (Pacific-slope call may be given by either species, whereas 2-parted call only given by Cordilleran)."

Bevier (in prep.) also states that:

"Identification of vagrant Western Flycatchers to species problematic in some cases without specimen evidence. Vocalizations may help, but it should be noted that calls (e.g., male Position Note and alarm seet!) may not be diagnostic . . . Pacific-slope Flycatcher accidental in s. Louisiana (specimen . . .) and e. Pennsylvania (Lancaster Co., 2 records, possibly involving the same bird . . .). Pennsylvania records identified by call note, so perhaps only probable to Pacific-slope. Cordilleran Flycatcher accidental in s. Louisiana (specimen . . .) and se. New York (banded . . .). Reports of Western flycatchers not identified to species in the East include: Brigantine NWR, NJ, 16 Nov 1981 . . . , 14-15 Nov 1992 Warren County, IA . . . , Eastern Shore of Virginia NWR, VA, 12-29 Nov 1993 . . . "

The reason that we believe the North Carolina flycatcher is a Pacific-slope is that its call appears to match precisely the typical Position Note call on the National Geographic Society (1985) tape. Moreover, the bird responded vocally to the Pacific-slope calls on this tape but did not respond to the Cordilleran Flycatcher vocalizations on the tape, when played back to the bird by Will Cook and others on 15 January. This is the first record of the Western Flycatcher complex from North Carolina.

In November 2002, the North Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted the Western Flycatcher complex to the Official State List (LeGrand et al. 2003). However, the Committee failed to accept the record to Pacific-slope Flycatcher, citing concerns that it would be nearly impossible to convincingly prove that the bird was a Pacific-slope and not a Cordilleran from the evidence on hand. Thus, on the NC Bird List this record must be listed as Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (or Western Flycatcher complex), rather than Pacific-slope Flycatcher.

We wish to thank Ned Brinkley, Louis Bevier, Tony Leukering, and Joseph Morlan for reviewing the original description and for providing valuable insights into the problems of identification of the Western Flycatcher complex. We also thank Will Cook, who has made photographs and sonograms of this North Carolina flycatcher currently available online at <http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/psfl.html>.

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Verification that the Chuck-will's-widow Occurs in Winter in South Carolina

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The Chuck-will's-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*) has been classified as a summer resident in South Carolina, with an early arrival date of 11 March (Post and Gauthreaux 1989). This note transmits two reports verifying that the species occurs in coastal South Carolina during the winter.

On 26 January 1996, McCallum made a videotape of a Chuck-will's-widow that was in his yard on Sullivan's Island, Charleston County. The bird was perched on the top of a fencepost, in full view. McCallum was able to watch the bird for only a brief period, until it left its perch after Northern Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*) began mobbing it. The site is a garden area sheltered by a mature stand of live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*). McCallum digitized the videotape, and a print is deposited in the Charleston Museum (ChM 2003.27.016).

On 29 January 2003, Dias found a dead Chuck-will's-widow at the U.S. Coast Guard station site on North Folly Island (Charleston Co.). The bird had just died, and the body was still warm and flexible. It had been sitting in a sparse grassy area several meters from coastal scrub dominated by live oaks, wax-myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) and yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*). The