

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

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 Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*) for North Carolina

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On 28 December 2003, Josh Rose and party located and identified to genus an *Empidonax* flycatcher on the Jordan Lake, NC, Christmas Bird Count. The flycatcher was observed in the morning in and around the margins of a cow pasture along Hanks Chapel Road in Chatham County.

At 07:45 on the morning of 30 December, Carter relocated the flycatcher in the same pasture and identified it as a Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*). He observed the flycatcher periodically until about 09:00 as it foraged in the pasture. Many birders saw the flycatcher on following days, and it was last reported on 22 January 2004 (Davis 2004). Photographs were secured by Will Cook and Jeff Phippen and placed on their personal websites for public viewing and for permanent documentation at the NC Museum of Natural Sciences.

The overall impression of the bird was a grayish flycatcher, pale below with the eye-ring and wing-bars characteristic of an *Empidonax*. The upperparts were gray, tinged on the back with olive green. The head was rounded, with only a very slight peak at the rear of the crown, and was gray with a tinge of olive green on the nape. The dark eye was encircled by a fairly uniform thin white eye-ring. The underparts were whitish, with grayish sides and a slight yellowish wash on the center of the lower breast and belly. The wings were dark gray with two buffy wing-bars, buffy edges to the tertials, and short primary projections. The tail was fairly long, dark gray, and notched, with distinct and uniform thin white outer edges. The bill was fairly long and narrow as viewed from the front, with a dark upper mandible. The lower mandible was pinkish orange at the base, with a dark tip.



Figure 1. Gray Flycatcher, Chatham County, NC, 31 Dec 2003. Photo by Will Cook.



Figure 2. Gray Flycatcher, Chatham County, NC, 19 Jan 2004. Photo by Will Cook.

The flycatcher foraged by moving through a weedy cow pasture, perching on weed stalks and saplings and making frequent sallies, mostly to the ground. When perched, it continuously lowered its tail from a stationary position and raised it back in a deliberate, not jerky or twitching, manner. It flitted its wings occasionally immediately upon alighting on a perch, but generally the wings were motionless when it was perched. On 1 January 2004, LeGrand observed the flycatcher and heard it give a soft “whit” call note.

While non-breeding, non-singing *Empidonax* flycatchers are notoriously difficult to identify, the combination of field marks and behaviors of the Chatham County bird support its identification as a Gray Flycatcher. This species is described as the “longest” *Empidonax* species in the United States (Sibley 2000), with a longer bill and tail than other species and, as the name implies, an overall grayish appearance, all consistent with the bird observed. Gray Flycatchers have an olive greenish tinge to the otherwise gray upperparts in basic plumage (National Geographic Society 1999). First-year birds have buffy wing-bars and tertial edges. The lack of darker green or brown tones above or extensive yellowish below, and the presence of a uniform thin eye-ring, tend to eliminate Pacific-slope (*E. difficilis*), Cordilleran (*E. occidentalis*), Acadian (*E. virescens*), Willow (*E. traillii*), Alder (*E. alnorum*), and Yellow-bellied (*E. flaviventris*) flycatchers. Other *Empidonax* species that may appear more grayish above and pale below include Least (*E. minimus*), Hammond’s (*E. hammondi*), and Dusky (*E. oberholseri*) flycatchers. In contrast with Gray Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher is the smallest North American *Empidonax*, with a short bill, short tail, and bold eye-ring. Hammond’s Flycatcher has a “tiny” mostly dark bill, short tail, long primary projection, and gray head contrasting with a “rather dark

olive breast and back” (Sibley 2000). Dusky Flycatcher appears closest in overall plumage and shape to Gray Flycatcher but has a short, mostly dark bill, and gray head contrasting with underparts and upperparts as in Hammond’s.

Several references (Kaufman 2000, Sibley 2000, National Geographic Society 1999) state that the downward “tail wagging” of Gray Flycatcher is “distinctive” or “unique” for this *Empidonax*. While other *Empidonax* may jerk or flick their tails in an upward motion, often accompanied by wing flitting, only Gray Flycatcher has a gentle, downward tail wag, much in the manner of an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*). The downward tail wagging was very apparent in the Chatham County bird and was captured on video.

This constitutes the first record of Gray Flycatcher for North Carolina and one of the few eastern United States/Canada records of this *Empidonax* that breeds primarily in the Great Basin in the western United States and winters primarily in Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995). Coincidentally, a Gray Flycatcher was also seen in Ontario from December 2003 into January 2004, for the third record for that province (Currie 2004). The North Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted a written description of this Chatham County bird provided by Carter and also accepted photos taken by Will Cook (LeGrand et al. 2005). As a result of acceptance of both written and photographic material, the species was placed directly onto the Official List.

Literature Cited

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