

Nesting Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (*Tyrannus forficatus*) in Greenville County, SC

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The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) was originally classified as an accidental visitor in South Carolina (Sprunt and Chamberlain 1949, Burton 1970), with about ten reports through 1979. Since 1980 there have been at least 40 reports (McNair and Post 1993, Redshank Software 2005), most of which occurred during May–July. By 2004, three nesting attempts had been documented. The first of these occurred in July 1982, in Youngs Community in upper Laurens County. One young fledged (Mancke 1982). A pair nested in the same area in 1983 (LeGrand 1984), but the outcome was not reported (McNair and Post 1993). A family group of five was reported by Robin Carter et al. in Edgefield County, west of Saluda, in July 2004. This flock consisted of several young that probably had fledged nearby (Davis 2004), although the specific locality was not determined. The present report documents the third and fourth successful nestings in South Carolina, and the first instance of a pair’s raising two broods in one breeding season in South Carolina.

On 5 June 2010, while visiting the Kellet farm on Gunter Road, near Piedmont (Greenville County), South Carolina, Lorraine Brown saw two Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. On 14 June she informed members of the Greenville County Bird Club of her find, and many were able to observe the birds over the next few weeks. Mr. Kellet, the farm’s owner, called the birds “Split-tailed Fence-sitters”, and said that they had been visiting his farm for the past few years. He also said that he had observed as many as ten, although details of this observation are not available.

Gunter Road is a typical rural road of the South Carolina piedmont. There is a cattle farm on its east side, with pasture, scattered trees, a barn and outbuildings, and a small pond. The west side is bordered by a tree farm. The area is similar to the habitats of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in the western part of their range (Regosin 1998).

On 16 June, Chip and Sara Gilbert observed three young Scissor-tailed Flycatchers at the Gunter Road site. Although the young had already fledged, what was assumed to be their nest was located about 30 feet above ground on a horizontal metal support strut of a utility pole. Adults were seen feeding the young through 20 June. Many visiting birders were able to approach the flycatchers closely without disturbing them. The birds’ habit of perching on the utility lines along the road made observation and photography easy. The young were reported in the Gunter Road area on several occasions through 5 July. A report of a juvenile on 15 July was not confirmed.

A second breeding attempt was initially reported by Simon Harvey, who saw Scissor-tails, presumably the same pair, mating on 16 June. Chip Gilbert saw further mating on 20 June. Don Faulkner photographed the female nest-building on 18 June, and Chip and Sara Gilbert reported similar activities on 19 June. This nest was on a separate strut a few feet from the first nest. It appeared to be constructed of grass, plant stems, and twigs, and some possibly synthetic fiber. Donnie Coody and others saw the female sitting on the nest on 20 June. Chip and Sara Gilbert observed the female delivering food and then brooding the young on 10 July. These same behaviors were noted by Paul Serridge on 12 July.

The presence of nestlings was confirmed by Jeff Catlin and Pam Torlina on 14 July, when they observed the head of a single chick. On 17 July, Paul Serridge and others saw two chicks. Todd Arcos, Jeff Catlin, Don Faulkner, and Jane Kramer saw three nestlings on 20 July. On the morning of 24 July, Dennis Trapp observed the young fledge: one flew across the road to the tree farm; the other two stayed on the utility pole near the nest and were fed repeatedly by the adults. On 25 July, Paul and Barbara Serridge observed the young in a small tree in the tree farm. They were calling regularly, and the female was seen feeding them, while the male perched on a utility line. The Scissor-tail pair regularly and vigorously chased any birds that approached the nest. The male successfully repulsed Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*) and Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), well before they were near the nest. There were no further sightings of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in the Gunter Road area until 28 August, when Rob Hunnings photographed three flycatchers perched on the utility lines. After that date, the birds were not seen again, and all traces of the nests had disappeared. Double-brooding is rarely seen in Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. For example, in a two-year study of 111 breeding pairs in Oklahoma, only three cases of double-brooding were found. In two of these instances, the first brood fledged prematurely due to human disturbance (Regosin 1998).

In summary, this report provides details of two successful nestings by a pair of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers during June–July 2010 in the upper piedmont of South Carolina. These nestings constitute the fourth and fifth breeding records for the state, and the second and third instances in which young were confirmed fledging at a specific locality. The findings have additional significance because they document a case of double-brooding, which is rare in this species.

Literature Cited

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