

Status of the Gray Kingbird in South Carolina and Neighboring Regions

William Post

1907 I'On Avenue, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482

In South Carolina, the Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) was once a casual breeder in Charleston County. Apparently it no longer breeds and is now a rare, irregular transient on the immediate coast, and a casual visitor on the coastal plain outside the tidal zone. This kingbird breeds from northern Colombia and Venezuela, through the Caribbean Basin and the Bahamas, and in North America from Mississippi to southeastern North Carolina. North of Florida, it has been found nesting only near the coast (Post 2013).

Breeding

South Carolina has six confirmed nesting records, all made before 1894. In spring 1832, the son of Paul Lee showed Rev. John Bachman a pair of Gray Kingbirds that were nesting on the College of Charleston campus. The kingbirds' first nest was destroyed, but they nested again that year, and continued doing so at least three more years, rearing two broods each season (Audubon 1831). A. T. Wayne (1894) found the next nest on 27 March 1885, on Sullivan's Island. The nest, which contained one egg, was in a White Poplar (*Populus alba*) within a meter of a residence. Wayne collected the female and egg. On 30 May 1893, Wayne collected two adults and a clutch of two eggs, also on Sullivan's Island, in the vicinity of Ft. Moultrie. Upon dissection, he found the female was about to lay a third egg. The nest, also in a private yard, was 6 m above ground near the top of a Southern Live Oak (*Quercus virginiana*). Based on Wayne's data, SC egg dates are 27-30 May.

In May 1927 Wayne and A. Sprunt, Jr. saw a Gray Kingbird in Mt. Pleasant and suspected it of breeding; Wayne searched "every suitable locality", but found no nest (Wayne 1927).

E.v.S. Dingle saw four Gray Kingbirds together on the western end of Sullivan's Island on 11 August 1942. Two to four Gray Kingbirds were seen together on Lighthouse (Cape) Island, Cape Romain, in three breeding seasons (1945 to 1947; J. Shuler, A. Sprunt, Jr.), and it is possible nesting occurred. T. Patterson saw a pair on 11-13 May 1984 in appropriate nesting habitat on Fripp Island. On 13 July 1993, at Debidue Beach (Georgetown Co.), Lex Glover saw a pair accompanied by a juvenile, but the nesting locality could not be determined.

Nonbreeding

Excluding possible breeding individuals, from 1909 to 1955, Gray Kingbirds were reported in SC in only six years. After the 1950s, the Kingbirds were noted more regularly: in 30 of the 55 years (from 1961 to 2015).

Coast Through 2016, at least 53 reports have been published. The extreme dates are 9 April (1964, Edisto Island) to 28 October (2000, James Island). The kingbirds have occurred in two peaks: mid-April to late May: (64% of reports), and late July to early September (31%). Gray Kingbirds found in spring north of their breeding range may represent cases of overshooting (Armistead and Illiff 2002). Veit and Petersen (1993) believe that overshooting may lead to northward range expansion, and extralimital birds should be classified as pioneers rather than vagrants.

Coastal Plain Through 2016, seven reports were made, all in the fall: (1) Savannah River Site, in Aiken Co. on 19 November 1956 (Odum and Norris 1957), (2) Lake Moultrie on 7 August 1976 (Crutchfields), (3) Santee NWR on 25 October 1980 (Beatty *et al.*), (4) Greeleyville, (Williamsburg Co.), 27-28 October 1989 (Lex Glover *et al.*, photo), (5) Columbia, 6-12 September 2004 (Mike Turner, photo in *North American Birds* 59:60; verified by SC Bird Records Committee, no. 2015-020), (6) Richland Co., 27-29 August 2006 (R. Carter *et al.*, photo; verified, SCBRC no. 2015-019), (7) Santee NWR, 29 October 2016 (C. Donnelly, N. Dias, photo).

Neighboring regions

North Carolina has at least 70 reports through 2015, spanning the period 12 March (1957) –2 November (2002). Unlike South Carolina, where all inland reports have been from the Coastal Plain, birds have been seen in the NC Piedmont on at least three occasions. At Raleigh, two were seen on 16 April 1959 and one appeared on 3 October 2015. At North Wilkesboro, one showed up on 5 August 1966. These sightings are unusual because of their distances from the ocean (Raleigh, 190 km; North Wilkesboro, 350 km).

Breeding may have occurred at Southport Village, NC, in 1957 (B.R Chamberlain 1975; Audubon Field Notes 11:398). For several weeks, starting 28 June, a “group” of the kingbirds was present (Waters Thompson) and on 21 August, Cecil Appleberry watched four, one of which he “suspected might be a bird of the year”. During 1-21 June 1996, two Gray Kingbirds were associating at Ft. Caswell, Brunswick County. Nesting was confirmed the next year at the same site, where, on 21 June, Wayne Irwin photographed a nest that contained two eggs (Chat 62:45, 1998). Ft. Caswell is the Gray Kingbird's northernmost nesting location in North America.

In Georgia, the first nest was found in July 1938 on Cockspur Island (Eyels 1938). Another nest was found on the same island on 24 June 1939 (Eyels 1941). The Gray Kingbird has nested at other Georgia localities: Sea Island (1983), Jekyll Island (1991), and Savannah (2005). On Jekyll Island on 9 October 1994, M.W. Oberle saw adult Gray Kingbirds feeding young cowbirds (species unknown: Brown-headed Cowbirds, *Molothrus ater*, as well as Shiny Cowbirds, *M. bonariensis*, were in the area). In Georgia, 30 of 48 occurrences were in April-May. Due to the presence of breeding birds, a relatively large proportion of Georgia reports (32%) have been in summer. In fall, a peak occurred in August (21% of sightings). Several winter reports have been made, but none verified. The range of Georgia dates is 16 April to 2 November.

Documentation

Specimen Study skins (male; Charleston Museum 30.147.514), collected by A.T. Wayne on Sullivan's Isl., 30 May 1893. A female (Am. Museum of Natural History 306308), collected 30 April 1840 by Audubon, was probably from the College of Charleston population.

Photograph Fort Moultrie, Sullivan's Island, SC 10 October 2015 (Pam Ford; Carolina Bird Club Photo Gallery)
<https://www.carolinabirdclub.org/gallery/Ford/grak.html>

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