

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Tyrant flycatchers, black phoebe, and western kingbird



By Elizabeth Hacker
Overview

In the United States, the tyrant flycatcher (Tyrannidae) family includes 37 species and 10 genera.

Flycatchers vary in size and color, but the variation is often so subtle that identification can be difficult. Most have drab gray or brown feathers on their upperparts and buff or lemon yellow on their underparts. A few exceptions to drab flycatchers include the black phoebe, the bright red and black vermilion flycatcher, and the graceful scissor-tailed flycatcher. Birders get excited when these birds make rare appearances in southern Colorado!

This past spring while birding with friends, we observed flocks of small migrating flycatchers darting in and out of grasses and shrubs. Identifying these little birds was a challenge. When we simply couldn't be sure, we listed them as empids, short for the Empidonax species, or birds specific to the smallest flycatcher genera. The least flycatcher is a member of this group that nests in southern Colorado.

Migration

Flycatcher migration patterns and nesting locations vary among species. Flycatchers winter in South Texas, Mexico, and Central and South America. Migration routes are north-south, and distances can be within a small region or intercontinental from South America to the Arctic. Many species nest in the East, others in the West, and some are specific to the coastal regions of North America. Typically, they arrive here in early to mid-May and begin to leave in late August to mid-September.

Flycatchers migrate at night when the air is calm and the threat from predators is reduced. In the spring, if lucky, I will happen upon flocks of flycatchers not commonly found here, that have been grounded due to weather. When resting, they stay hidden and are difficult to see but if they are feeding, they scurry in and out of shrubs and trees, eating vegetation and small insects. Large insects are not yet abundant in spring and it is thought that this type of foraging takes less time and provides the energy necessary for the bird's migration.

Diet

Flycatchers are primarily insectivores. During migration, birds need energy for their long flight. In the spring and fall, a time when insects are not as plentiful, flycatchers must supplement their diet with vegetation. After they reach their destination, adults form pairs, establish terri-

tory, and prepare to raise a family. Large insects provide a nesting pair with protein for strength and endurance to successfully reproduce. The pair must work diligently to feed their chicks a diet rich in protein, for within 21 days after hatching, the chicks will grow to the size of an adult and leave the nest.

During the summer, flycatchers can easily be observed in the morning and late in the afternoon as they hunt for insects. They put on quite a show as they sally back and forth to nab a flying insect with stunning precision.

Flycatchers in Colorado

Each summer, typically four or five species of flycatchers nest or migrate through this region, although 10 to 12 species are known to nest in Colorado. Due to weather, drought, fire, and other conditions, this number will fluctuate. The western kingbird, western wood peewee, and the least flycatcher nest in this region. All of these birds have distinctive markings and are easily identified but because they are insectivores, it's unlikely they will come to a feeder. They nest in different habitat zones and require large territories, so it would be unusual to see them together.

Western kingbird

At almost 9 inches in length, a wing-span of 15.5 inches, and weighing in at 2 ounces, the western kingbird is the largest of the flycatchers in this region. It is strikingly handsome with its lemon yellow breast and ashy gray wings. It is an aggressive bird that will chase after a hawk or crow. If a raptor is seen missing flight feathers, chances are it has been harassed by a western kingbird. They can be found in open marshy or grassy areas perched on a reed, fence, or utility line.

Western wood peewee

At 6.25 inches in length, a wing span of 10.5 inches, and weighing in at half an ounce, the western wood peewee is a medium-size flycatcher. It is a grayish-brown bird



with two pale wing bars. Underparts are very light with gray on the breast and sides. It has a peaked crown at the back of its head that gives it an angular appearance. Its bill is dark except for the yellow at the base of the lower mandible. The western wood peewee is named for its song and is most often seen in the brush at the edge of a forest or in cottonwood trees near a source of water.

Least flycatcher

The least flycatcher, at 5.5 inches in length, an 8-inch wing-span, and weighing in at a quarter of an ounce, is a member of the smallest group of confusing empids but it is one of the easier ones to identify. Adults have grayish-olive upperparts, darker brown wings with two distinctive white wing bars, very light underparts, and a distinctive white eye ring. It is found in deciduous forests. I most often see them in Fountain Creek Nature Park. Its small size doesn't deter it from chasing off large birds such as a blue jay, more than six times its size.



Tyrant flycatchers are fascinating birds. Each spring I look forward to their return, but I miss them when they depart in the fall. This past winter I was fortunate to see many flycatchers, including the least flycatcher, wintering in Ecuador. I can't be sure, but I think one of them may have recognized me!

Elizabeth Hacker is a writer and artist. Email her at elizabethhacker@ocn.me to share bird pictures and stories.

High Altitude Nature and Gardens (HANG)

Local forest "farmacy" and Shakespeare's timely advice

By Janet Sellers

Our ponderosa landscape offers nutrition and healing at home and on forest hikes. I've never found wild morels, or tame ones for that matter, but after a nasty wasp sting last month, I'm keeping my eye on wild broadleaf plantain (pronounced "plan-tin").

I've seen it around town and in our local forests, and I'm glad plantain grows here. It's pretty as greenery along flagstone walks, and is a medicine and nutritious food raw or cooked, often favored over spinach and other dark greens. It treats digestive disorders, and crushed (on a hike, just chew the leaves) to use as a poultice to stings, bites, and open wounds to stop infection and inflammation. Young leaves are eaten raw, blanched and eaten in salads, or blanched then frozen and used later in a sauté, soup, or stew.

Edible root to flower, broadleaf plantain boasts a 4,000-year tradition in Europe. Historic records indicate various Native peoples called this plant "The footstep of the white," as it was found where the European settlers traveled.

Long before European settlers showed up here with their favorite seeds (including plantain) for familiar food and medicine, Shakespeare mentioned plantain in Romeo and Juliet. In Act I, Scene II, while Benvolio bemoans feelings of anguish, Romeo proclaims plantain benefits to relieve physical suffering: Romeo: "Your plantain-leaf is excellent for that." Benvolio: "For what, I pray thee?" Romeo: "For your broken shin."

Plantain contains seven flavonoids, beta-carotene, crude fiber, dietary fiber, fat, protein, and carbohydrates. It also contains vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, C, and K, and calcium, chromium, iron, magnesium, manganese, phosphorus, potassium, selenium, and zinc.

The highly nutritious Purslane also abounds in our area, albeit non-native as well. Purslane, also known as Portulaca oleracea (widely grown in India and Europe),



Above: The deep green and pleasant leaf shape of the low-growing, sun-loving broad leaf plantain makes a fetching color combination amid a flagstone walkway and is an edible landscape plant. Plantain can be used in salads, sauteed as a side dish and combined with other vegetables and dishes, and is used medicinally as well. It is often found in local garden landscapes. *Photos by Linda Close.*

looks like a cute succulent with rounded green leaves offering much needed omega 3 fatty acids—more than any other leafy plant—and more than many fish oils (yummier, too). Their slightly sour leaves and yellow flowers are tasty in salads, added to soups, or sauteed for a side dish.

Sorry to say, I pulled purslane out of my garden years ago, assuming it a useless weed. In reality they are a tasty, rich source of vitamin-C, and some B-complex vitamins like riboflavin, niacin, pyridoxine and carotenoids, as well as dietary minerals such as iron, magnesium, calcium, potassium, and manganese. Eat this plant only from a "clean" organic place in your yard; it's also at some grocery stores.

In our cultivated garden beds, lettuces have gone to seed, tomatoes are green, zukes, beans, and squashes are ready, and it's time to seed dark greens, beets, carrots, and brassicas. My second try at sunflowers are up, as are the seeds out of my organic cantaloupe from the market. Visit our Monument Community Garden Facebook page for the latest on what to plant now; we have endless videos, recipes, and handy hints for gardening here in our unique Tri-Lakes microclimates.

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