

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

# Eastern kingbird: *Tyrannus tyrannus*



Above: Illustration by Elizabeth Hacker of Eastern Kingbirds. A color version is posted at [www.ocn.me/v13n7bird.htm](http://www.ocn.me/v13n7bird.htm).

By Elizabeth Hacker

In May, my brother from Mississippi and I had a brief opportunity to go birding. Jack has a sharp eye and knows his birds. We only had a few hours so in an effort to see the most birds in this short time, we headed to Fountain Creek Nature Preserve.

Fountain Creek attracts a variety of birds because it is a primary north-south migration route for many birds that nest in Colorado. It is in a narrow corridor with many vegetation types and is a great place to bird.

In a little more than an hour we'd logged 23 species. Jack had never seen a blue grosbeak so we looked for it, but it was a little early in the season for that species and we didn't find it. Of the many birds we did see, one that surprised us was the eastern kingbird.

### Tyrant flycatchers

The eastern kingbird is a mem-

ber of the Tyrant Flycatcher Family, named for their habit of catching flying insects in mid-air, usually in a short dart from a perch. Their flight is strong, buoyant, and agile with quick turns and abrupt movements. They perch upright while and intently watching for prey.

In May of 2010, I featured the western kingbird, another member of this family that nests on the Palmer Divide, but this was the first time I'd seen an eastern kingbird here. My bird guide indicates that its range includes much of North America, including Colorado, so perhaps it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise to see it here.

### Description

This small, conspicuous white bellied bird has the largest distribution of any North American kingbird. Adult male and female are similar but males are slightly larger. They are strikingly beau-

tiful with a rich black crested head and a white chin. Backs are black and their charcoal gray wings are outlined in white. Their flat beaks, legs, and claws are black and their posture is erect.

Because I wasn't expecting to see an eastern kingbird this far west, it didn't occur to me what it was until my brother pointed out the white band at the end of its tail. Juvenile birds are similar to adults but are gray with light brown or tan under parts, and the white edge on their tails is barely noticeable.

It is an aggressive bird that stands its ground. It isn't flighty like many other species of migrating songbirds. An eastern kingbird will chase off or kill any bird that enters its territory. When we were children growing up in Minnesota, Jack and I observed an eastern kingbird literally tear apart a bluejay at one of our bird feeders. We were awestruck that this cute little bird could overpower and kill a bird more than twice its size. Later we surmised that the bluejay may have raided the kingbird's nest and angered the little bird.

### Habitat

Eastern kingbirds are found in open areas at the edge of a forest in scrublands, wetlands, or open grasslands. Unlike the western kingbird that tends to nest in scrub oaks, the eastern kingbird nests in deciduous trees usually near water.

### Diet

In spring and summer when breeding and nesting, the eastern

kingbird consumes a diet high in protein from insects. Insects provide the protein needed for courting, mating, and egg laying. Chicks are fed insects to help them grow. There are only a few short weeks after the chicks fledge the nest before they begin preparation for a long migration to their winter home in South America.

Migration begins in early September and to prepare for it, flycatchers add fruit to their diet to build up the fat reserve necessary for a long flight. When migrating, kingbirds fly during the day, which requires more energy than flying at night.

### Nesting

Eastern kingbirds are considered monogamous because a pair will stay together for at least one breeding season. The male attracts a female by singing and showing off his ability to fly in a zigzag pattern.

In late May, females begin building nests from twigs, bark, and grasses and lining it with softer materials to protect the eggs. She will lay two to five cream-colored eggs with reddish spots and broods them for about three weeks. Both parents

feed and tend to the chicks until they are ready to fledge the nest, which is about three weeks after hatching.

### A late spring and wildfires

The unusually late spring may have influenced the timing of migration for many birds. Palmer Lake resident Herman Spielkamp, who is an avid birder and volunteers at the Monument Fire Center caring for 25 bluebird boxes, noticed that there have been fewer bluebirds and swallows nesting this year.

I am a bird enthusiast but not an expert so I rely on more knowledgeable birders for their opinion of this kind of behavior. Ken Pals said that birds will have off-years and didn't think it was that unusual for birds to pass up historical nesting areas. He added that weather does play a role in bird reproduction and the late spring could have affected nesting numbers of bluebirds and swallows.

When asked how the Waldo Canyon and Black Forest fires would affect birds, Pals said any nests in the path of the fires would be destroyed and smoke



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