

First Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonamus varius*) record for the United States

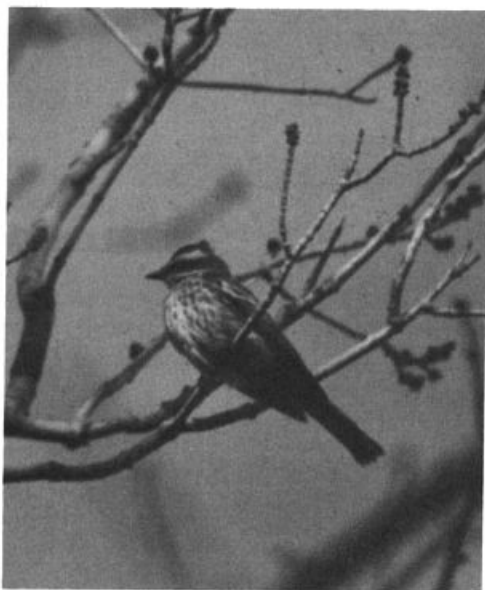
Dennis J. Abbott III and Davis W. Finch

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1977, an unfamiliar flycatcher was discovered at Biddeford Pool, Maine by Susan Bowie and David Whittier. Its rufous wings and tail, streaked and vaguely yellow underparts led them to the not unreasonable conclusion that it was a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*), and identified as such, the bird and its whereabouts were quickly communicated to the northeastern birdwatching community. It remained in a limited area of coastal thickets through November 11 and though its presence during this period was decidedly irregular it was nonetheless seen by perhaps as many as 100 observers. We spent about 14 hours looking unsuccessfully for the bird November 6, 7 and 8, but were more fortunate November 10 when we found it at 9:30 a.m. and kept it under observation uninterrupted for nearly two hours.

Both of us had seen Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers within the previous four months. When we finally saw it, the Biddeford Pool bird struck us as entirely unfamiliar: here was a slim and medium-sized flycatcher, having only the slightest suggestion of yellow below, rather dark overall and obscurely marked except for striking contrasts in the face. We wrote detailed notes from which the following description is derived.

Size about that of an Eastern Phoebe though somewhat longer-tailed, facts we were able to establish with certainty only when it chanced to alight in a bare tree very close to a Western Kingbird. The four or five other observers witnessing this juxtaposition agreed that the bird in question was about

three-fourths the size of the kingbird, looking shorter and markedly slimmer. The crown was a smooth, even, dark grayish "chocolate" brown with one or two short, minute, hairlike white lines occasionally visible; as we later realized these were feathers of the otherwise veiled crown patch. The crown feathers were sometimes raised giving the appearance of a slightly elevated cap, but never enough to give the bird a crested look. Broad pale creamy, almost whitish superciliary stripes met narrowly over the bill and extended well behind the eyes; sometimes under the closest scrutiny these stripes could be seen to join in a narrow, uneven hairlike whitish line across the nape. A broad mask originating in the nape passed through the top of the eye and somewhat below the bottom of it, narrowing and terminating at the base of the maxilla. In the loreal and postocular regions this mask was as dark as the cap, paling somewhat rearward and blending imperceptibly into the dull brown nape. A whitish area below the mask set it off rather starkly. The back was a rather dark, cold brown slightly paler than the cap and neither streaked nor entirely smooth, appearing faintly mottled with gray. The wing coverts, secondaries and tertials were slightly darker than the back and narrowly and crisply edged with whitish or cream, the folded primaries narrowly and faintly edged with rusty and extending about one-third the length of the tail. In a droop-winged attitude characteristically assumed by the bird, the outermost primaries could be seen clearly. These, appearing pale by translucency, were plainly



Variegated Flycatcher at Biddeford Pool, Maine, Nov. 11, 1977. Note boldly marked face, streaked underparts. Photo| Davis W. Finch.

attenuated. The wing linings were pale, possibly creamy. The upper tail coverts were bright rusty, in fact constituting the spectral "center" of an otherwise quite drab bird, and though normally concealed by the folded wings they were obvious in flight. The tail was rather long, slightly forked, the central rectrices dark brown above and at least the edges of the remaining rectrices rusty, all rectrices appearing abraded terminally. The under surface of the tail was grayish, not rusty.

The chin and throat were grayish white, unmarked, with a dim convergence of streaks in the malar region. The remainder of the underparts were dull pale tan, recalling the tone of "Western" Palm Warbler, softly and rather densely streaked with dull brownish except on the lower abdomen, and occasionally appearing to show a vague and narrow unstreaked area centrally. There was a very slight intensification of tone on the abdomen, approaching yellow; the crissum was marked with single dim streaks laterally.

The eye and feet were dark, the bill rather narrow and slender, maxilla brownish black, mandible the same except pinkish orange basally, and appearing almost entirely this tone when viewed from below. The maxilla was hooked but not prominently so, rictal

bristles were slender and short, difficult to see even at close range. Behavior was typical of flycatchers, catching flying insects in short flights from an exposed perch. The bird made no wing or tail movements after alighting, and we heard no vocalizations of any sort. As may be imagined, these notes were made from close observation, much of it with a 20x telescope, the finer points being confirmed when during a long period the bird perched quietly below eye level along a beach. We returned the following day and despite repeated opportunities to study it we were unable to refine our initial impressions. We obtained a few photographs, watched it eat bittersweet berries, and actually observed the bird go to roost for the night. It could not be found the following day and after a final search November 13 we concluded that it was no longer present.

WE WERE UNABLE PROMPTLY to examine specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and our first opportunity to do so was thus delayed to Nov. 15, when DWF visited the American Museum of Natural History. Here a quick look at *Myiodynastes* (big, "horse-headed" with heavy, broad bills and thick, wiry rictal bristles) was enough to exclude that genus,



Variegated Flycatcher at Biddeford Pool, Maine, Nov. 11, 1977. Note faintly marked back, pale-edged wing coverts and secondaries. Color original shows rusty (paler here) upper tail coverts and edges of primaries and rectrices. Photo| Davis W. Finch.



*Variegated Flycatcher at Biddeford Pool, Me., in rain Nov. 8, 1977. Note emarginated inner webs of outer primaries, a character absent in *Myiodynastes* and *Legatus*. Photo/ Simon A. Perkins.*

but among some 220 Variegated Flycatchers the Biddeford Pool bird was perfectly matched by a number of specimens, and though a positive racial determination was not possible, probabilities favor the nominate race breeding in Argentina and Bolivia and migrating to northern South America. Of whatever race, the bird was certainly a Variegated Flycatcher, and a first North American occurrence.

Migrant flycatchers from South America are not new in the northeast or even in Maine, where at least five Fork-tailed Flycatchers have occurred, four presumably and one probably the nominate *tyrannus* from Argentina and Chile. A Tropical Kingbird of the South American race *chloronotus* taken at nearby Scarborough early in the century is seemingly unique in the A.O.U. area. All of these were fall records.

In retrospect it was unfortunate that the bird ever came to be labeled "Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher", for as a result it received neither the widespread nor the critical attention it warranted. Indeed, the label seemed to have a prejudicial effect on observers' ability accurately to perceive the bird, a hastily circulated flyer announcing it as Sulphur-bellied going so far as to eliminate Streaked Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes maculatus*) from a differential diagnosis on the basis of certain plumage characters. Quite understandably, no one who saw the bird knew what it was, a "square peg, round hole" situation had developed, and the bird remained unidentified until a specimen collection could be consulted.

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