

# Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher: New to Ontario and Canada

by  
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September 28, 1986 was one of those wet, grey days which seem to rain birds. The morning saw Presqu'ile Provincial Park, Northumberland County, Ontario, awash with birds. However, it was not until afternoon that Tony Beck, Tom Plath and the author ventured into Calf Pasture. While the other two chased after a flock of passerines in what turned out to be the wrong direction, Beck wandered along the edge of Presqu'ile Bay, looking for "photographic opportunities". He was not to be disappointed.

At approximately 1400h, Beck discovered a large "streaked" flycatcher which he tentatively identified as a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*). He took several pictures, then ran to fetch the author and Plath. Unfortunately the bird had disappeared before the other two members of the party arrived. After a frustrating one and a half hour search the three of us left to put out an alert on the bird as a "streaked" flycatcher. Within minutes of our return, a half hour later, the author rediscovered the bird as it flitted from one hiding place to another.

For the following two hours a small group of birders observed the

bird from various angles and distances, and were able to take detailed notes on plumage and behaviour characteristics. At the same time, Beck was able to obtain several diagnostic photographs of the bird. Although the sun was obscured by clouds, we were able to discern many fine details of the bird's plumage in neutral lighting conditions. Despite its ability to stay out of sight, 150 to 200 people were able to observe the bird over the next three days. It was last reported on the morning of 1 October (R. D. McRae, pers. comm.).

## Description

Throughout most of our observation, the flycatcher selected inconspicuous perches well hidden in the middle story of tall eastern cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*). It was often nearly obscured from view by thick tangles of Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus vitacea*) or wild grape (*Vitis riparia*). Occasionally it perched in the open, usually fairly high in the trees. When perched, it generally maintained an upright posture. Its infrequent flights consisted of a quick swoop to an equally well hidden spot. We did not see it do any flycatching sorties,

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Figure 1: Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, 28 Sept. to 1 Oct. 1986, Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland. Photo (28 Sept.) by Tony Beck.

although it did pluck insects from leaves near its perch. While the bird did not flick or pump its tail, it did raise the feathers of its forecrown several times, giving it a "peaked" effect over the eyes. Several times it perched with drooped wings, with the outermost primaries splayed out.

The bird's *gestalt* was that of a heavy-headed "kingbird" (*Tyrannus* sp.), a conclusion immediately contradicted by its streaked breast, head, and back, and its strikingly rufous tail (Figure 1). Direct comparisons allowed us to ascertain that it was slightly larger than a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*).

The bird had a large black bill similar to that of a Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*). The bill was slightly "hooked" at the tip and was flanked by long bristles at the base (Figure 2). At close range the gape was noted to be pinkish. When seen from below, the lower mandible was proximally one third pinkish, the rest being black. The legs were dark grey or black.

The crown and nape were greyish-brown with faint darker streakings; there was no contrast between the crown and the nape. On the day following the discovery of the bird, observers were able to note the yellow median stripe (Ian Jones, pers.



*Figure 2: Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, 28 Sept. to 1 Oct. 1986, Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland. Photo (28 Sept.) by Tony Beck.*

comm.), but this was not apparent during my study. Above the eye there was a broad greyish-white superciliary, faintly marked with fine grey streaks, that ended behind the auricular area and did not continue through the nape (Figure 3).

The dark eye was set in a dark blackish "mask" that extended through the lores and covered the auricular area (Figure 3), much like the mask of a Gray Kingbird. This mask was a solid dusky-black, not marked with a whitish area as depicted in the National Geographic Society Guide (1983). The malar

stripe was off-white, having a similar tone to that of the superciliary. The submalar region was marked by a poorly defined convergence of the greyish-brown chest streaks, which continued into the chin to form a dark chin strap. The throat was greyish-white, marked with fine, greyish streaks (Figure 4).

The breast was marked by poorly-defined, "blurry", greyish-brown stripes. These gradually became finer and more distinct in the lower breast region, but gradually faded out in the upper belly (Figure 2). The breast, belly and crissum were otherwise pale yellow, most intensely in the belly. The exact tone varied according to lighting conditions.

The plumage of the mantle and lower back was composed of brownish feathers edged pale grey. Because this edging did not continue around the tips, the bird's back had a "streaked", not scaled look (Figure 3). At rest, the bird appeared to have reddish "shoulders", due to reddish emarginations to the otherwise greyish-brown lesser coverts. The outermost median coverts were also edged reddish, with the remaining median coverts having pale off-white emarginations. The greater primary coverts, secondaries and tertials were greyish-brown with broad, pale yellowish-white edgings. These edgings were particularly broad in the secondaries and tertials, accounting for about one half of each feather (Figure 1). As in the back feathers, the pale edgings did not extend around the tips. Accordingly, they formed yellowish-white streaks in the wings. The primaries and ter-

tials were dark greyish-brown, with no hint of rufous. They had slightly paler emarginations, but this was almost unnoticeable. The wing linings were not seen well but appeared to be a pale off-white.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the bird was the flashy, rufous rump and tail. The upper tail covert feathers were bright rufous, marked with very fine, almost indiscernible shaft streaks. These streaks grew broader further up the rump. The upper surface of each tail feather was bright rufous, but marked with a dark, chocolate-brown streak. These streaks were fairly broad in the innermost tail feathers (accounting for about one-third of the feather surface) but rapidly diminished with each successive feather, with only a fine streak discernible in the outer-



Figure 4: Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, 28 Sept.-1 Oct. 1986, Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland. Photo (28 Sept. ) by Tony Beck.

most ones. The undersurface of the tail was the same bright rufous as the top, but was unmarked. The tail was only slightly notched (Figure 2). Overall, the tail appeared broader but shorter than that of an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*).

None of the wing or tail feathers appeared to be at all abraded. Overall, the bird had the neat, tidy look of a freshly moulted immature.

### Similar Species

As we watched the bird we were very much aware of the potential difficulty in reaching a final identification. Although there are no North American species remotely similar to the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, there are several neotropical lookalikes. Accordingly, we took extensive notes and attempted to obtain as many photographs as possible. In subsequent weeks we reviewed the literature, consulted the skin collection at the National Museum of Canada (NMC), and communicated with authorities, notably Dr. J. Van Remsen of Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge).



Figure 3: Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, 28 Sept.-1 Oct. 1986, Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland. Photo (29 Sept.) by Alan Wormington.

Two of the lookalikes, the Piratic Flycatcher (*Legatus leucophaeus*) and Variegated Flycatcher (*Empidonomus varius*), can be readily discarded as possibilities based on their small size (phoebe-sized), more petite bill, and predominantly dark tail and rump. A good discussion on the separation of Variegated from Sulphur-bellied is presented in Abbott and Finch (1978) and need not be reproduced here. Most of the remaining members of the genus *Myiodynastes* are quite dissimilar. Golden-crowned (*M. chrysocephalus*), Golden-bellied (*M. hemichrysus*) and Baird's Flycatchers (*M. bairdi*) are black-crowned, green-backed, and lack pronounced streaking on the chest.

The only remaining similar species is the Streaked Flycatcher (*M. maculatus*). Streaked Flycatcher is widely distributed in the Neotropics, and includes several distinctively marked subspecies. *M. m. solitarius* breeds in southern South America, migrates north, and could "overshoot" into North America. This subspecies has dark brown tail feathers with rufous edgings; not rufous with dark centres as in our bird (Hilty and Brown 1986: 516). Furthermore, the undersurface of the tails of *solitarius* specimens in the NMC collection are pale grey, not bright rufous.

The Streaked Flycatcher found in Central America (*M. m. insolens*) is very similar to the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, but has a yellow superciliary, white breast, and predominantly pale (pink/flesh coloured) lower mandible. This is compared to the whitish superciliary, yellow

breast and mostly black bill of the Sulphur-bellied. Furthermore, the Streaked Flycatcher has more extensive rufous in the wings than is the case for the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (J. V. Remsen, pers. comm.). However, these features are variable and subject to interpretation. The only fully reliable "field mark" for separating the two is the presence of a dark bar through the chin in Sulphur-bellied (Ridgway 1907; Remsen, pers. comm.). This distinction was particularly obvious in the specimens examined by the author in the NMC collection. Photographs of the Presqu'ile bird clearly show this mark (Figure 4), confirming its identification as a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher.

### Discussion

In summary, the Presqu'ile bird appears to be almost identical to the Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers contained in the NMC collection. The similar Streaked Flycatcher is ruled out by the dark bar through the chin, predominantly black bill, whitish superciliary, yellow breast, restriction of the rufous in the wings to the median coverts, and predominantly rufous tail feathers.

This sighting represents the first record of Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher for Ontario and Canada (Wormington 1987). Furthermore, it is the first member of its genus ever recorded in Canada (Godfrey 1986). The Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher normally summers in Central America, with its breeding range extending into southern Arizona, and winters in northern South America (American

Ornithologists' Union 1983:470). Extralimital records of Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher for North America, excluding northern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and Texas, are listed in Table 1. Half of these records are from California, relatively close to the limited North American breeding range of the species. Most extralimital records, including all of the California sightings, are from September or early October, bracketing the timing of the Presqu'ile bird. An exception to this early fall pattern was one reported on a Christmas Bird Count in Mississippi on 31 December 1979. In Texas, the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, listed as "hypothetical" as recently as 1974 (Oberholser 1974:542), occurs very rarely in the spring (e.g., Webster 1983) and has been known to breed (Webster 1977). The only extralimital spring record from further afield was obtained in Louisiana in 1984. There is one previous record of this species for northeastern North America, one seen and pho-

tographed 12-13 November 1983, on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

The late September timing of the Ontario sighting fits well with an emerging pattern for vagrant Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. It is apparent that, instead of migrating south to northern South America, a few Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers head north, with this one ending up in Ontario instead of Peru! It should be noted however, that late September would also be the time of year when a disoriented post-breeding Streaked Flycatcher might appear, only to be called a Sulphur-bellied! Unfortunately, most field guides, including those dealing with the Neotropics, fail to adequately discuss those differences between Sulphur-bellied and Streaked Flycatchers. The situation is further confused by the several subspecies of the Streaked Flycatcher. The best treatment of the complex in a standard field guide is found in Hilty and Brown (1986), which describes *M.m. insolens* and *M.m. solitarius*,

Table 1: Extralimital records of Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher (*Myiodynastes luteiventris*) in North America (excluding southern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and Texas).

STATE	DATE	SOURCE
Alabama	6-9 Sept. 1985	Purrington (1983)
California	16-20 Sept. 1983	McCaskie (1984)
	22 Sept.-5 Oct. 1974	McCaskie (1975)
	6-9 Oct. 1978	McCaskie (1979)
	7 Oct. 1979	McCaskie (1980)
	8 Oct. 1983	McCaskie (1984)
Louisiana	28-29 April 1984	Imhof (1984)
	30 Sept. 1956	Newman (1957)
Massachusetts	12-13 Nov. 1983	Nikula (1984)
Mississippi	31 Dec. 1979	Hamilton (1980)

as well as noting the importance of the dark chin as a field mark of Sulphur-bellied.

The fact that this Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher was found at Presqu'ile Provincial Park was not entirely an accident. Presqu'ile, which projects into the western end of Lake Ontario, is fast gaining a reputation as one of Ontario's premier vagrant traps; just two years earlier Canada's first ever Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) was discovered there (McRae 1985). With increased coverage, Presqu'ile and nearby Prince Edward Point, Prince Edward County, can be expected to produce further outstanding vagrants.

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