

NOTES ON A HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER

by Kenneth Winkler

Author's Comment. *There is food for thought in some of the events surrounding the appearance of a rare bird in my front yard: a second look that turned out to be less reliable than a first impression; a moral dilemma over the bird's fate; and an identification confirmed not by specimen or measurements, but by a videotape made with a neighbor's camera. I thought readers of Bird Observer might be interested in this. A detailed account of the bird's identification will appear in a future issue.*

Late in the day on December 19, 1987, an olive gray bird with eye ring and wing bars landed on a branch outside of my kitchen window at 35 Service Drive in Wellesley. That evening I made the following entry in my notebook.

A small bird perched on our feeder tree around 3:40 P.M. For a moment I thought it was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, but it was clearly a flycatcher. I had Janie look at it, and I proclaimed it a phoebe -- I'd seen a phoebe in our yard several weeks before -- despite the conspicuous wing bars and eye ring. I went outside to get a closer look. [The bird] was very still, perching on a small stake, chewing what looked like a piece of crab apple. White wing bars, very distinct. White eye ring, thickest in back, next most in front. White throat. Yellow wash on belly. Dark legs. Light lower mandible, dark upper. Yellow edging [on the secondaries]. It flicked its tail several times, spasmodically. Its wings were still. Its feathers were fluffed up, its head drawn in, its bill pointed slightly upwards. Suddenly it pressed its feathers [against its body], craned its neck, and took off with a Sharp-shinned Hawk in pursuit. They took several turns in the crab apples before the Sharpshin left. The bird then sat in [a] crab apple. I took a photo from eight feet or so, observing the same marks, *as well as whitish edging on the tail* -- this before I had consulted a field guide. [The bird] then flew down to the marsh and gave several soft or liquid *whits*. Back olive in bright light, gray in shadow. An *Empidonax* flycatcher certainly. But which one?

The next morning I found the bird at the edge of the marsh feeding on berries in a stand of *Euonymus*. The bird was now more active, flicking both wings and tail and dashing at berries as if they were flying insects. I began to think that the bird was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet after all. Its bill was small, its tail was not as long as it had seemed the day before, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet in Massachusetts in winter was, I kept telling myself, far likelier than an *Empidonax*. I continued to notice the light lower mandible and the whitish

edging on the tail, as well as the absence of a dark bar on the wing, but I was now inclined to explain them all away: "Perhaps *this* kinglet has a pale bill and lacks the dark bar; perhaps the edging on the tail is really yellow, and the yellow tint on the inner feathers of the tail is hard to see." As for the unkingletlike deportment of the day before, I put it down to the hardships of the season. This wasn't the first time a bird's identity had dissolved under scrutiny.

On the evening of the nineteenth, before having these second thoughts, I had called several people and told them I was "absolutely certain" there was an *Empidonax* in my yard. I now called them back and told them that the bird was a kinglet. Brian Cassie and Mark Kasprzyk said they wanted to take a look anyway, partly because I was unwilling to retract any of the details in my description of the night before. The lower mandible was undeniably pale, at least in part. There was whitish edging on the tail, confined, it seemed, to the outermost feathers. And there was no dark bar on the wing.

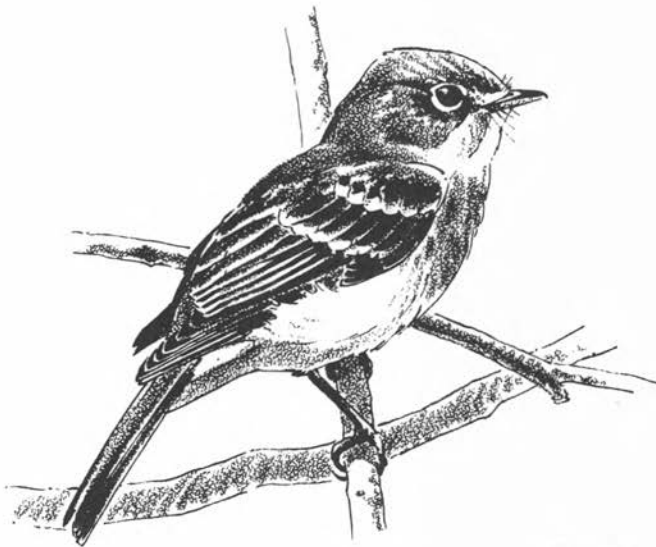
Cassie, Kasprzyk, and I observed the bird at 9:30 on the morning of December 20 and agreed that it was not a kinglet but an *Empidonax*: it was, to begin with, distinctly larger than a nearby chickadee. In order to learn more, we agreed, the bird would have to be captured. We then called Donna Munafo, who came with a butterfly net (at Cassie's request), and Elissa Landre, who arrived ninety minutes later with her mist nets. By that time the bird was ranging widely, and it was far from clear where the nets should be placed. But Landre had also brought along a pond net, and shortly after noon, while I was picking up pizza for lunch, Kasprzyk caught the bird in the net as it flew by.

Kasprzyk and Landre measured the bird in the early afternoon. On the basis of their measurements and our in-hand observations, we identified the bird as a Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*), the first for Massachusetts and New England. The identification renewed a question that had been on our minds since early morning. Should the bird be "collected" (that is, killed and preserved as a study skin), or should we set it free? The only real point of agreement was that I, as the bird's discoverer, should make the final decision.

I lost most of a night of sleep trying to make it. I had moral or aesthetic qualms about collecting the bird, but I found it difficult to spell them out. I thought there was something marvelous about the bird's appearance in my yard, and a place in a tray didn't strike me as a fit ending. My thinking had less to do with the sanctity of life than with an observation of Gilbert White: "It is, I find, in zoology as it is in botany: all nature is so full, that that district produces the greatest variety, which is the most examined." White was responding to nature's plenitude, its tendency to realize every possibility. Among the rewards of watching birds are glimpses of this tendency, glimpses in which one and the same event appears utterly amazing and at the same time understandable: ("A Hammond's Flycatcher in *Massachusetts*?" "Well, I suppose western tyrannids

do often drift east in fall.") The Hammond's Flycatcher united improbability with pattern in an especially powerful way, and collecting the bird seemed to me to threaten that.

I was also suspicious of the assumption that all of the weight of science was on the side of taking the specimen. There is often something to be gained from studying a vagrant in the field, and some of what we were later to observe -- its heavy reliance on fruit as a source of food, for example -- was very instructive. On the other hand, there was no particular reason to believe that the bird, once released, would survive to be studied, and there was a lot to be said for collecting it. Collection would do more than settle the question of identity: a specimen, a bird of verifiable identity, can play a role in research that mere "documentation," no matter how rich, cannot. I was able to think of several questions that would, I assumed, go unanswered if we released the bird. Is it a bird of the year? Is it a male or a female? Just how much fruit is in its stomach? I also knew that years later, someone might formulate a question, undreamt of by any of us, that a specimen could help to answer. And it was, I knew, a little too easy to pride myself on saving the bird from the specimen trays. I visit those trays often, and in trying to make sense of this very bird, I was happily relying on the research and the field guides that specimens make possible.



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Hammond's Flycatcher
December 1987
Wellesley, MA

Illustration by Barry W. Van Dusen

By the time we had identified the bird it had lost nearly half of a cold day's feeding. We therefore decided to keep it overnight. The following morning I decided that the bird should be released, but before we let it go, I borrowed a neighbor's videocamera and made a tape of the bird in the hand. On the following day (December 22), I videotaped the bird in the field, capturing its incessant wing-flicking (accompanied at times by flicks of the tail) as well as a series of twenty calls (the *whits* -- or, more accurately, *pits* or *peets* -- I had described three days before in my notebook). I sent copies of the videotape to Stephen F. Bailey, author of the entries on most of the western *Empidonaces* in *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* (Farrand 1983, vol. 2, pp. 262-269) and vice-secretary of the California Bird Records Committee; to Ned K. Johnson, professor of zoology at the University of California, Berkeley, and curator in ornithology at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology there, whose monograph on the Hammond's, Dusky, and Gray flycatchers is the most thorough study of their biology (Johnson 1963); and, at the suggestion of Bruce Sorrie, to the Library of Natural Sounds at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

Bailey was the first to respond. In a letter of March 6, 1988, he wrote that the bird

was indeed a Hammond's Flycatcher, no question. That is what I thought it was during my viewing of the hand-held portion of your videotape, and the bird's vigorous and continual wing-flicking strongly reinforced this feeling. But when I heard the calls all doubt was eliminated.

I played the videotape to several other members of the California Bird Records Committee just before our meeting on 30 January.... There was some debate and difference of opinion expressed during the in-hand part. Several thought it might be a Dusky, based on the hand-held views. As soon as they saw the wing-flicking, however, all thought it was probably a Hammond's. Of course, with the first call everyone said okay it's Hammond's for sure, just as I had.

Johnson, in a letter of March 14, 1988, was able not only to identify the bird but to age it.

I viewed the entire tape last evening. It completely confirms the identity of the bird as *Empidonax hammondii*. The tiny dark bill, the sooty gray breast, and the *notched* tail are all clearly evident. The spread primaries also clearly reveal the diagnostic wing formula of Hammond's, in which *three* feathers form the wing tip, rather than four as in *E. oberholseri*. The long wing tip, with the inner primaries being "cut out" (that is, short in relation to those forming the wing tip) was also clearly seen on the tape. Most satisfying was the clear view of the dorsal tips of the rectrices which show them to be

retained juvenile feathers. In other words, your bird was in its first year of life, and was probably in the vicinity of six months old. That vagrant birds are often juveniles or immatures is once again documented by this flycatcher.

Finally, the call notes, evident near the end of the tape, are perfectly typical of *E. hammondii*. These were alarm vocalizations and are those described as "bick" in my 1963 monograph (p. 174). They clinch the case for *hammondii*, not that there was any doubt at that point.

The Library of Natural Sounds at the Laboratory of Ornithology was unable to identify the calls, but they sent an audio recording to Kenn Kaufman, coauthor of a series of articles on the identification of *Empidonax* flycatchers (Whitney and Kaufman 1985, 1986). Kaufman wrote (in a letter of March 30, 1988 to Andrea Priori of the Library of Natural Sounds) that the calls "make a perfect match with my recordings of the callnotes of known Hammond's. This species is one of the more distinctive members of *Empidonax*: the only species in the genus with a fairly similar callnote is Alder Flycatcher, which is quite different in structure and plumage."

Acknowledgments. I want to thank Brian Cassie, Mark Kasprzyk, Elissa Landre, and Donna Munafo. I am especially grateful to Stephen F. Bailey, Ned K. Johnson, Kenn Kaufman, and Andrea Priori for their help in confirming our identification, to Pedro de Rezende for the use of his camera, and to Janie Penn.

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KENNETH WINKLER, an associate professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, has been observing birds for twelve years, and has a way with flycatchers. The porch of his home at 35 Service Drive must be the only one east of the Mississippi on which both Hammond's and Ash-throated flycatchers have perched. His article, "The Waban Arches, Wellesley," in the April 1982 issue of *Bird Observer* (10: 60-64) describes the area where these flycatchers appeared. Ken neglected to mention that throughout the sojourn of the vagrant flycatcher (December 19-29), he generously arranged for a nearly steady stream of birders

to visit his home to view the bird. His tape of the rare bird was also featured by Bruce Schwogler on the local television news.

Editor's Comment: Kudos to Winkler! Seldom has the controversial subject of "collection" of vagrants or rarities been approached with such reasoned comments as Ken presents in this article. His journal notes reveal the meticulous birder at work: Ken observed the bird, noted its fieldmarks, and photographed it -- "*this before I had consulted a field guide*" (italics mine). Furthermore, the episode with the Hammond's has demonstrated the value of the videotape technique as an aid in the identification of rarities and the confirmation of sightings and, circumstances permitting, as an acceptable substitute for a collected specimen. D.R.A.

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