

Age, Sex, and Scissor-tails

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One great advantage of digital photography and electronic communication is the ability to share wonderful images. We were able to enjoy last autumn's Marconi Beach Scissor-tailed Flycatcher from afar before getting to see it personally during our annual Thanksgiving visit to the Cape. Besides allowing us to appreciate the beauty of the bird, the high quality online images allowed us to determine its age and sex after consultation of Peter Pyle's (1997) in-the-hand identification guide and Jonathan Regosin's (1998) Scissor-tailed Flycatcher species account in the American Ornithologist's Union's *Birds of North America* series. In the past many people assumed that vagrant birds were randomly shifted about by strong weather regardless of age and sex. Partly due to banding results and data from specimens in museums, it is now generally believed that young birds are more likely to get lost during migration; being able to determine the age of a vagrant can lend support to this idea. Learning the sex of lost birds may also help us learn about differences in migratory behavior between males and females.

Adult and young (hatch-year or HY) Scissor-tailed Flycatchers differ in the extent and timing of their prebasic molt. Adults have an incomplete to complete molt in July to September, before they leave the breeding range. Young Scissor-tails have a partial to incomplete molt somewhat later in the season (August to November), often completed after they reach their wintering grounds. Young Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have what is termed an "eccentric" molt pattern, meaning that they replace only some of the central primaries and inner secondaries. Examining the relative ages of feathers in the wing is most easily done with a bird in the hand, but many of the photographs of the Marconi celebrity allow one to see a contrast between the darker freshly molted feathers and the browner, faded older feathers. The tertials (innermost flight feathers) of this bird were new, except for the central one on the left wing, contrasting with the brownish, more ragged-edged innermost secondary feather. It is hard to judge the age of the remaining five secondaries, since they are overlapped in the photos. In the photos showing the outer wings slightly drooped, it appears that only one primary (p7) is new, typical of an HY's eccentric molt pattern. The tail seems to be entirely old feathers, as expected for about 75 percent of HY Scissor-tails, although some uppertail coverts are missing. Another feature of the tail that reveals the bird's age is its relative shortness. The Marconi bird's tail is only slightly longer than its wing chord length, which averages about 120 mm in males and 114 mm in females. A short-tailed adult female Scissor-tail has a 145 mm tail, clearly longer than our subject's tail.

Once the bird's age is known, consultation with the references reveals that HY female Scissor-tailed Flycatchers show little pinkish flank color, in comparison to moderate amounts shown by HY males. The other feature revealing sex in young Scissor-tails is the shape of the tip of the outermost primary feather – in females it is fairly rounded, similar to adjacent feathers, while most young males have a pointed or

narrow-tipped outer primary. In two of the photographs we examined, the outer wing is relaxed enough to reveal the gracefully tapered outer primary tip of a young male.

These days it is often possible to see the kind of feather detail needed for using technical references like Pyle or the *Birds of North America* species accounts. If you take carefully detailed notes or obtain sharp photos of key feathers, it is possible to not only identify a bird but to learn something about who it is – male or female, young or older – as well as what it is. 🦅

References

- Pyle, P. 1997. *Identification Guide to North American Birds. Part I. Columbidae to Ploceidae*. Bolinas, CA: Slate Creek Press.
- Regosin, J.V. 1998. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 342. A. Poole and F. Gill, eds. Philadelphia, PA: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC: The American Ornithologist's Union.

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Bill Elrick: <<http://albums.photo.epson.com/j/AlbumIndex?u=4159967&a=30954730&f=0>>

Phil Brown: <<http://mysite.verizon.net/vze2xrsu/id18.html>>

Chris Buelow: <<http://mrines.com/STFL/>>



This photograph of the Marconi Scissor-tailed Flycatcher shows the tapered outer primary on the left wing as well as the tertial-secondary comparison mentioned in the text. Photograph by Phil Brown taken on November 23, 2003.