

**RECORDS OF THE “WESTERN FLYCATCHER” IN FLORIDA, WITH  
EMPHASIS ON A VOCAL INDIVIDUAL THAT UTTERED CALL-NOTES  
CONSISTENT WITH PACIFIC-SLOPE FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax difficilis*)**

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In 1989, members of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list Committee (American Ornithologists' Union 1989) agreed that the Western Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*) complex consisted of two species: the Pacific-slope Flycatcher (*E. difficilis*) and the Cordilleran Flycatcher (*E. occidentalis*). These former subspecies were elevated to species status based on Johnson (1980) and Johnson and Marten (1988), who reported on apparent genetic and vocal differences and assortative pairing. However, Johnson (1980, 1994) found a mixed population breeding in northern California, and Rush et al. (2009) found hybridization and introgression in southwestern Canada. These discoveries have led some ornithologists to suggest that the two taxa should not have been elevated to separate species. Outside of the hybrid zones, however, Pacific-slope Flycatchers and Cordilleran Flycatchers maintain separate populations, with consistent genetic and vocal differences (Rush et al. 2009).

The “Western Flycatcher” was not known to occur in Florida until recently (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Greenlaw et al. 2014). Pranty (1996) cited a probable report at Gulf Breeze, Santa Rosa County, Florida, on 28 December 1995 by Bob, Lucy, and Scot Duncan. The first verifiable record was thought to have been discovered in 2015, but an earlier, unpublished record, dating to 2004, was posted to eBird ten years later. With additional records later in 2015 and in 2020, there now are four known records of the “Western Flycatcher” complex from Florida. We detail these records here.

**Previous records.**—One silent individual was photographed at Fort De Soto Park, Pinellas County, on 31 October 2004 by Lyn Atherton. This record, which was never published formally or submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC; A. W. Kratter in litt.), was posted to eBird by Ron Smith (2014) in December 2014.

One silent individual was photographed in a residential yard in Tallahassee, Leon County, on 8 January 2015 by Elliot Schunke (2015). The bird foraged on the ground and from a perch less than 30 cm above the ground. This record was accepted by the FOSRC (#2015-1063) as a “Western Flycatcher,” and was thought at the time to represent the first record from Florida (Greenlaw 2016).

One silent individual was photographed at Fort Pickens, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Escambia County, on 1 October 2015 by Brenda and Jerry Callaway (2016).

Also present the following day, this individual was accepted by the FOSRC (#2016-1093) as a “Western Flycatcher” and was thought at the time to represent the second record from Florida (Kratter 2018).

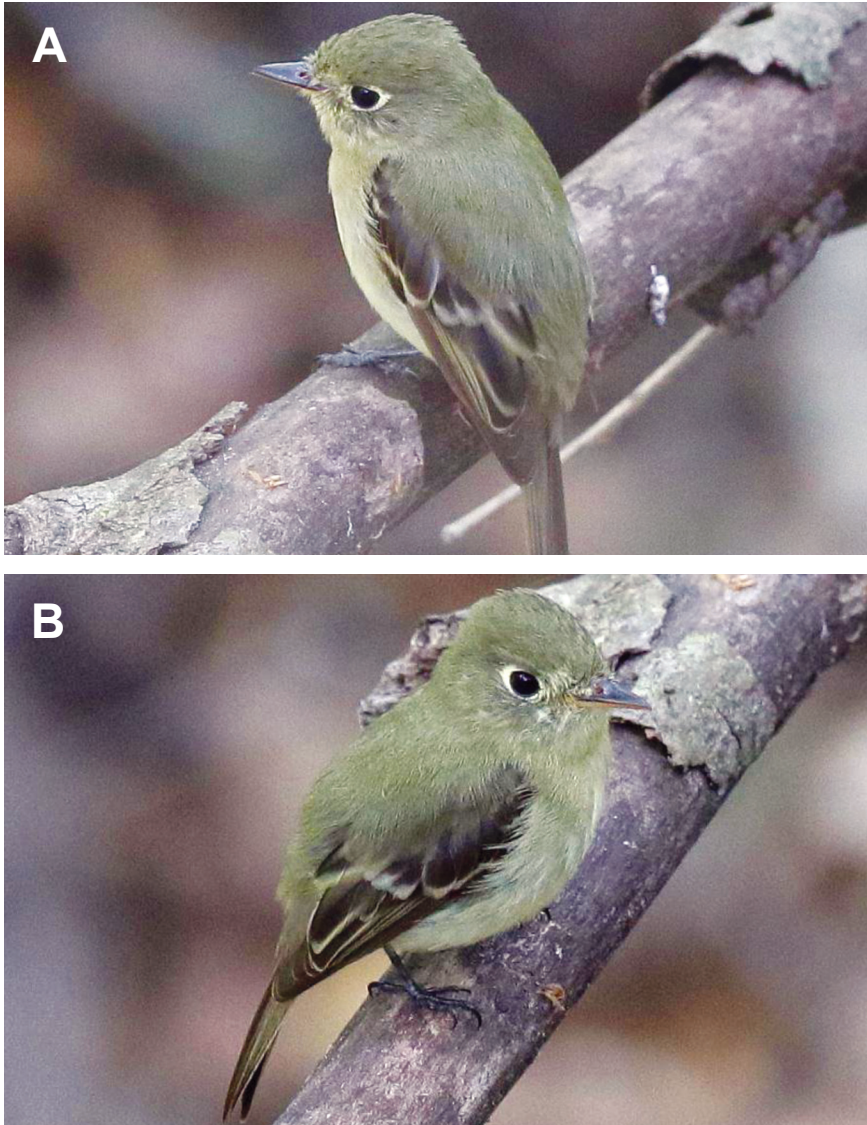
**The 2020 record.**—On 10 March 2020, DF was exploring Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park in Keystone Heights, Clay County, Florida. Along a trail near the ravine overlook, he encountered a flock of small passerines that included a yellowish *Empidonax* flycatcher. DF obtained one photograph of the flycatcher before he lost sight of it, and posted this photograph and a description to an eBird checklist (Fraser 2020) and to the “Florida Birding and Rarities” Facebook page. Rex Rowan and BP independently posted DF’s photograph and description to the “Frontiers of Bird Identification” listserv and requested commentary. Plumage characteristics that pointed to the bird being a member of the “Western Flycatcher” complex rather than a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*E. flaviventris*) included the peaked crown, moderate primary extension, long tail, and very narrow distance between the bottom of the lower wingbar and the pale fringing on the secondaries (Baumann et al. 2014). The potential for the Clay County flycatcher to represent a “Western Flycatcher” encouraged dozens of birders, including the three of us, to visit the park and to obtain better photographs (Fig. 1) and audio recordings (Fig. 2). The flycatcher was seen near the ravine overlook daily through 22 March 2020, after which all state parks were closed because of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

**Habitat and behavior.**—The Clay County “Western Flycatcher” was found in the ecotone between xeric longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*)–oak (*Quercus* spp.) sandhills and mesic deciduous forest surrounding a stream-fed ravine. It foraged at heights of 0.4 m to ~7.5 m above ground, sallying from perches to capture flying insects. It would be visible for usually short periods before flying off and not being found again, often for several hours. Although most readily found during the morning (typically after 0800, when the park opened to non-camping visitors), the flycatcher could be viewed throughout the day. It associated with a wintering flock of landbirds that included Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila cerulea*), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*), Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*), Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*), and Yellow-rumped Warbler (*S. coronata*). On 14 March, a presumed pair of White-eyed Vireos (*Vireo gilvus*) chased the flycatcher out of their territory.

**Vocalizations.**—Usually during mornings, the flycatcher often uttered a short, single-noted, upslurred call termed a male position note (usually uttered by males but sometimes by females; Sibley 2002, D. Sibley in litt.). A spectrogram (Fig. 2) of a male position recorded by BP on 14 March shows a single, continuous note that ascends, then slightly descends before ascending again. This spectrogram signature, including the ladle shape (Johnson 1994) or kink (Pieplow 2011) in the center, is typical for Pacific-slope Flycatcher. In contrast, the male position note of a Cordilleran Flycatcher consists of two notes separated by a very brief pause, or break (Johnson 1994, McCallum 2005, Pieplow 2011, N. Pieplow in litt.).

**Records in eastern North America.**—In a non-exhaustive search that relied primarily on eBird, we found 37 records of “Western Flycatchers” in eastern North America, with the first occurring in 1991 (Table 1). Most of these records ( $n = 22$ ; 59%) either were not identified to species, or were identified solely from photographic or audio evidence, which may not be definitive. Seven flycatchers, all from Louisiana, were collected individually and determined to represent five Pacific-slope Flycatchers and two Cordilleran Flycatchers (Table 1, but see Discussion). Records based on DNA collected from fecal samples in New York and Connecticut suggested that two other flycatchers were Pacific-slope Flycatchers (Table 1).

**Discussion.**—Whether or not the Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Cordilleran Flycatcher should continue to be recognized as distinct species is well beyond the scope of this paper. Outside the hybrid zones, the two taxa are genetically and vocally distinct, but within the contact zones, individuals may utter vocalizations that are intermediate or may



**Figure 1. “Western” Flycatcher at Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park, Clay County, Florida, on 16 March 2020. Note the peaked crown (A), the eyering that is faint or absent above the eye and teardrop-shaped behind the eye (A, B), and the moderate primary extension (B). The upperparts were olive with a white eyering, and the underparts were yellow (varying according to lighting conditions) with a somewhat darker vest. The lower mandible was entirely yellowish-orange. The flycatcher uttered male position notes that are consistent with a Pacific-slope Flycatcher or an individual from the Pacific-slope Flycatcher–Cordilleran Flycatcher hybrid zone; more precise identification of this individual is not possible. Photographs by Mitchell Harris.**

Table 1. Records ( $n = 37$ ) of “Western Flycatchers” in eastern North America, which we define as the area eastward from the western boundaries of Ontario, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. We include only records verifiable from published evidence (photographs, specimens, or spectrograms of vocalizations). Individuals were identified as Cordilleran Flycatcher ( $n = 2$ ) or Pacific-slope Flycatcher ( $n = 13$ ) or were either not identified to species or were identified solely from photographic or spectrogram evidence ( $n = 22$ ). We accepted all original identifications as published or as accepted by members of the relevant bird records committees or eBird reviewers. Records are listed geographically, from Iowa and Louisiana east to Florida, then north to Nova Scotia. In the evidence column, LSUMZ numbers refer to specimens in the collection of the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science. eBird checklists are listed in the Reference column as an eight-digit number preceded by S; to access an eBird checklist online, type into a browser [ebird.org/checklist/](http://ebird.org/checklist/) followed by the checklist number beginning with S.

Published identification	Location	State or Province	Date(s)	Evidence	Reference
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Warren	Iowa	14–15 Nov 1992	Photographs	Brock (1993), Kent (1994)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Acadia	Louisiana	21–23 Dec 1994	Specimen LSUMZ 159809	Stedman (1995), D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Acadia	Louisiana	27 Dec 2019	Photographs	S62683584
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Cameron	Louisiana	28 Apr 1991	Specimen LSUMZ 152085	Muth (1991), D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher <sup>a</sup>	Cameron	Louisiana	28–29 Oct 1995	Specimen LSUMZ 162199	Jackson (1996), D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Cameron	Louisiana	3 Oct 2009	Specimen LSUMZ 184921	S48995464, D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Iberville	Louisiana	20 Oct 2015	Specimen LSUMZ	S63605879, D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Iberville	Louisiana	20 Oct 2015–14 Jan 2016	Specimen LSUMZ	S63605879, D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Iberville	Louisiana	12 Jan 2020	Specimen LSUMZ	S63336502, D. Dittmann (in litt.)
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Jefferson	Louisiana	22 Sep 2015	Photographs	S26698045
Cordilleran Flycatcher	Jefferson	Louisiana	28 Dec 2010	Audio	S21582655

<sup>a</sup>One Louisiana specimen (LSU162199) was originally accepted as a Cordilleran Flycatcher but has been reevaluated and is likely to be accepted by the Louisiana Bird Records Committee as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher (D. Dittmann in litt.).

Table 1. (Continued) Records ( $n = 37$ ) of “Western Flycatchers” in eastern North America, which we define as the area eastward from the western boundaries of Ontario, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. We include only records verifiable from published evidence (photographs, specimens, or spectrograms of vocalizations). Individuals were identified as Cordilleran Flycatcher ( $n = 2$ ) or Pacific-slope Flycatcher ( $n = 13$ ) or were either not identified to species or were identified solely from photographic or spectrogram evidence ( $n = 22$ ). We accepted all original identifications as published or as accepted by members of the relevant bird records committees or eBird reviewers. Records are listed geographically, from Iowa and Louisiana east to Florida, then north to Nova Scotia. In the evidence column, LSUMZ numbers refer to specimens in the collection of the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science. eBird checklists are listed in the Reference column as an eight-digit number preceded by S; to access an eBird checklist online, type into a browser [ebird.org/checklist/](http://ebird.org/checklist/) followed by the checklist number beginning with S.

Published identification	Location	State or Province	Date(s)	Evidence	Reference
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Lafayette	Louisiana	29 Dec 1995–4 Jan 1996	Photographs	S5977679
Cordilleran Flycatcher	Plaquemines	Louisiana	26 Jan 1994	Specimen LSUMZ 159810	Stedman (1994), D. Dittmann (in litt.) S52073924 S62208294
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Plaquemines	Louisiana	26 Jan 2019	Photographs	
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Plaquemines	Louisiana	7 Dec 2019–4 Feb 2020	Photographs, spectrogram	
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Plaquemines	Louisiana	7–8 Mar 2020	Photographs	S65600714
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Dauphin Island	Alabama	25 Sep 2002	Photographs	S17853886
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Fort Morgan	Alabama	13 Oct 2003	Photographs	S17853893
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Clay	Florida	10–22 Mar 2020	Photographs, spectrogram	S65807406; Fig. 1
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Escambia	Florida	1 Oct 2015	Photographs	S37099326
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Leon	Florida	8 Jan 2015	Photograph	S21258088
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Pinellas	Florida	1 Oct 2004	Photographs	S30606243
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Northampton	Virginia	12–29 Nov 1993	Photographs	S25417189
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Chatham	North Carolina	15 Jan 2000	Photographs, spectrogram	S23267189

Table 1. (Continued) Records ( $n = 37$ ) of “Western Flycatchers” in eastern North America, which we define as the area eastward from the western boundaries of Ontario, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. We include only records verifiable from published evidence (photographs, specimens, or spectrograms of vocalizations). Individuals were identified as Cordilleran Flycatcher ( $n = 2$ ) or Pacific-slope Flycatcher ( $n = 13$ ) or were either not identified to species or were identified solely from photographic or spectrogram evidence ( $n = 22$ ). We accepted all original identifications as published or as accepted by members of the relevant bird records committees or eBird reviewers. Records are listed geographically, from Iowa and Louisiana east to Florida, then north to Nova Scotia. In the evidence column, LSUMZ numbers refer to specimens in the collection of the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science. eBird checklists are listed in the Reference column as an eight-digit number preceded by S; to access an eBird checklist online, type into a browser [ebird.org/checklist/](http://ebird.org/checklist/) followed by the checklist number beginning with S.

Published identification	Location	State or Province	Date(s)	Evidence	Reference
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Caroline	Maryland	16 Nov 2015	Photographs	S25869676
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Whipple	Ohio	15 Dec 2015	Photograph	S26341120
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Cumberland	Pennsylvania	18–25 Nov 2012	Photographs	S12144004, S12145420
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Berks	Pennsylvania	20 Dec 2015–5 Jan 2016	Photographs, audio	S26433348
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Burlington	New Jersey	11 Nov–14 Dec 2019	Photographs, spectrogram	S61314369
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Cape May	New Jersey	20 Nov–7 Dec 2019	Photographs	S62122755
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	New York	New York	21–23 Nov 2015	Photographs, spectrogram, fecal sample	Goldberg and Mason (2017)
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	New York	New York	8–10 Dec 2016	Photographs	S32922727
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	New Haven	Connecticut	19 Dec 2015	Photographs, fecal sample	Goldberg and Mason (2017)
Pacific-slope Flycatcher	Hampshire	Massachusetts	23 Oct–2 Dec 2019	Photographs	S61346142
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Plymouth	Massachusetts	10 Nov 2006	Photographs, measurements	Rines (2008)
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Charlotte	New Brunswick	10 Nov 2015	Photographs	S25934338
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher	Antigonish	Nova Scotia	20 Nov 2015	Photographs	S25925038

utter vocalizations of both species (Johnson 1994; Lowther et al. 2020a, b; C. Benesh in litt.; D. Sibley in litt.). Vocal differences between the two species are subtle and subject to individual and regional variation (McCallum 2005, Pieplow 2011). Additionally, “Western Flycatcher” vocalizations overall are “more similar than different” (Lowther et al. 2020a, b). “Western Flycatchers” in the hybrid zone in southwestern Canada have mixed DNA that is skewed toward Pacific-slope Flycatcher haplotypes (Rush et al. 2009).

In the absence of any DNA material having been collected from the Clay County “Western Flycatcher,” we suggest that its identification to the species level cannot be made—this despite spectrograms (e.g., Fig. 2) that are consistent with Pacific-slope Flycatcher male position notes. We agree with David Sibley (in litt.), who stated that, “... Going by call note you can say that the Florida bird is a Pacific-slope Flycatcher or an intergrade, and definitely not from the core range of Cordilleran Flycatcher ...”

Although our search was not exhaustive and we probably overlooked some records, the 37 records of the “Western Flycatcher” complex in eastern North America (Table 1) reveal some interesting results. Only three records, two specimens and one audio record, were identified as Cordilleran Flycatchers, and these were all from Louisiana. Members of the Louisiana Bird Records Committee are currently reevaluating all specimens of the “Western Flycatcher” complex from that state using DNA analyses, and one of these specimens, originally identified as a Cordilleran Flycatcher, is likely to be accepted as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher (D. Dittmann in litt). Of the 13 Pacific-slope Flycatchers originally identified in the east, five were specimens from Louisiana, two others were identified from DNA extracted from fecal samples (Goldberg and Mason 2017), and six were photographic



**Figure 2.** Spectrogram of a male position note uttered by the “Western Flycatcher” at Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park, Clay County, Florida, on 14 March 2020. The note ranges from about 4.5 kHz to nearly 7 kHz. It appears on the spectrogram as a single, upslurred note with a distinct ladle-shape or kink in the center; male position notes uttered by Cordilleran Flycatchers appear on a spectrogram as two notes separated by a brief pause. Recorded by Bill Pranty using a Panasonic Lumix FZ80 digital camera. Spectrogram produced by Cornell Lab of Ornithology (Macaulay Library #ML 215522041). For the sake of clarity, extraneous sounds have been removed here; the unaltered spectrogram can be found at <[ebird.org/checklist/S65807406](https://ebird.org/checklist/S65807406)>.

and/or audio records. We recommend that the seven “Western Flycatchers” in eastern North America that were identified to species solely from photographs and/or audio—purportedly one Cordilleran Flycatcher and six Pacific-slope Flycatchers—be reevaluated to determine whether or not species identification is warranted.

The temporal pattern of the 37 records in Table 1 is intriguing. With a few exceptions—mostly representing flycatchers that were collected shortly after their discoveries—“Western Flycatchers” in the east usually represent individuals that remained for several weeks; many appeared to be attempting to winter or successfully wintered (Table 1). We suspect that the Clay County flycatcher wintered at Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park and was discovered four or five months after its arrival. The first “Western Flycatcher” in the east occurred in April 1991, which represents the only presumed northbound migrant found thus far (Table 1). The first winter record (which we define as the period from 1 November through 31 March) occurred during the 1992–1993 season. Through the next 12 winter periods, no more than one “Western Flycatcher” each season was found in eastern North America. But during the winter of 2015–2016, nine individuals were found, in seven states and provinces, as far northeast as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Canada (Table 1). Similarly, the winter of 2019–2020 seemed to be another pulse season, with eight records from four states, as far east as New Jersey and Massachusetts.

Based solely on records accompanied by DNA evidence, nine of the 37 (25%) “Western Flycatchers” found in eastern North America have been identified to species: seven Pacific-slope Flycatchers and two Cordilleran Flycatchers (one of which has been reidentified as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher; D. Dittmann in litt.). Based on these data, it seems that Pacific-slope Flycatchers are more likely to be found in eastern North America, but that Cordilleran Flycatchers may stray at least as far east as Louisiana.

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