

Habitat Choice of Vermilion FlycatchersWintering in Mississippi

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Since the 1940's, the Vermilion Flycatcher (Pyrocephalus rubinus) has become known as a regular fall and winter visitor to Louisiana and points eastward along the Gulf Coast. According to Lowery (1974:437), the habitat of the Vermilion Flycatcher in Louisiana is "the periphery of a small pond that has at least a few willows on its edge." Descriptions of sites of occurrence for Vermilion Flycatchers in Mississippi agree with this in respect to their consistent proximity to a pond or oxbow lake (Alexander 1976, Cashman 1979). However, the several birds noted from 1972 to 1975 at Lake Jackson by Alexander et al. often preferred to feed from "the very tops of the tallest cypress trees," although their territories also included "various hardwoods and willows." In its breeding range the Vermilion Flycatcher chooses similar habitats, i.e., rather open areas around water with willows, cottonwoods, etc. It does not share with the Eastern Phoebe (Sayornis phoebe) or with its western neighbor, Say's Phoebe (S. saya), their propensity for frequenting human habitations as nesting areas (Bent 1942). Thus, we were surprised to find two Vermilion Flycatchers that became "yard birds" in fall-winter 1985-86 in southern Washington County.

An adult male Vermilion Flycatcher was first noted in her yard by Mrs. Frances Parker on 28 November 1985. It was seen alighting on and flycatching from a fence at the edge of the yard. The location of the Parker residence is near the west perimeter of the Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge, about 6.5 km north of the Glen Allan community near Mississippi highway 1, and 32 km south of Greenville. Lake Washington, a large oxbow lake, is 2.5 km west of the site, and the nearest water body is a willow-lined ditch along the north boundary of the property where the bird was seen.

On 28 December 1985, Fulton first noticed the adult male Vermilion Flycatcher perched behind Mrs. Parker's house in a sugarcorn tree on a ditch bank. This ditch extends east 800 m

from Mrs. Parker's to Swan Lake, a 2000 ha cypress, buttonbush, and willow-filled oxbow lake encircling Yazoo NWR. Fulton's sighting was relayed to Alexander and thence to Davis and various Oxford and Greenville area birders, many of whom shared observations of this bird.

Observations of the Vermilion Flycatcher were made for 45 minutes on 4 January by Davis who obtained photographs as did also Tim M. Wilkins and Fulton. The bird most frequently perched on the roof peak of a shed located only a few yards behind the house. However, it alternated this with several other perches: two metal clothesline poles, a wire clothesline, the roof peak of the house, and a television antenna rising a meter above the roof of the house. Although a nearby tree was often used as a perch on the other days, on 4 January it alighted there only once or twice between its numerous feeding flights. The Vermilion Flycatcher was seen by Alexander and others on 5 January and by several Greenville and Oxford birders on 24 and 25 January. The last date it was seen was 25 January 1986. During its residence at Mrs. Parker's house, the Vermilion Flycatcher endured short periods of cold weather (but no snow), comparable to those cited by Alexander (1976) as failing to drive out wintering Vermilion Flycatchers in the same county.

A similar yard-frequenting habit was noted from about 7 January through 23 January 1986, for another bird, as Tim Wilkins frequently observed a female Vermilion Flycatcher at his residence on Yazoo NWR. It was last seen about the time the male was last seen at Mrs. Parker's, 3 km to the west. Deer Lake, site of several 1984 records, Mrs. Parker's, and the Wilkins' residence are all within 100 m of a wooded ditch leading to Swan Lake. These three sites share many characteristics with each other as well as with other reported locations of Vermilion Flycatchers. Bent (1940) says Vermilion Flycatchers were found where "...willows and cottonwoods with thickets of smaller trees and underbrush grew along irrigation ditches, ..." (p. 302). Similarly, he describes the nesting habitat (p. 303) as "...not far from an irrigation ditch, stream, or body of water...in cottonwoods, oaks,...and hackberry trees." Earlier reports (Alexander 1976) of Washington County sightings were from Lake Jackson, a small oxbow lake between the Mississippi River and YNWR.

Wintering Vermilion Flycatchers in Washington County have perched on willow, cypress, sugarberry, pecan, apple, poison ivy, rose bush, and other vegetation. Man-made perches often are also used; these have included wooden fences and duck nest boxes; television antennas; power, telephone, and clothes lines; metal

fencing; roofing; and a window air conditioner. On one occasion in January reported to Alexander, the bird was seen perching on an automobile radio antenna and picking dead insects off the windshield. There was no preference noted for any particular type of perch, but rather proximity to the point of contact with the immediately previous prey item seemed the most common factor in choice of perch. Usually the height was between one and five m above the ground, although the male at Mrs. Parker's was seen both on the ground and 12 m high in a sugarberry. As Bent noted (p. 306), we also "found this Flycatcher to be rather tame and unconcerned about our presence, flitting nervously from one perch to another, from some low tree or bush to a tall weed stalk and then back again,...." allowing people to approach to within 6 to 8 m.

On 11 November 1984, one female Vermilion Flycatcher was observed by Leroy Percy on the southwest side of Deer Lake at Yazoo NWR. It was seen there again on 16 November by Fulton. This female was joined by an immature male with red spots on a yellowish breast on 1 December. On 12 December 1984, there were two females, one with yellowish underparts, the other with salmon underparts. One or the other of these females was observed next to Deer Lake several times a week on warm afternoons through 19 January 1985.

In summary, the Vermilion Flycatcher in Washington County, Mississippi previously had been found consistently in association with oxbow lakes (Alexander 1976). The five most recent observations have been clustered near the most accessible parts of an oxbow lake, Yazoo NWR's Swan Lake. The habitat is the edge of cropland where it meets cypress swamp or riparian thicket. The birds often were unaffected by the close proximity of human activity.

Literature Cited

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