

Western Wood Pewee at Bellefontaine Beach, Mississippi

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On the morning of 30 September 1978, at Bellefontaine Beach, Jackson County, Mississippi, we observed a Western Wood Pewee (Contopus sordidulus) for 4 or 5 minutes during a 20-minute period; much of this time, it was only about 8 m from us. Lighting was good (thin overcast, but bright sky) and the bird was viewed against a backdrop of dark oak leaves.

The following is excerpted from our field notes: "Small flycatcher, distinctly smaller than Eastern Kingbird [Tyrannus tyrannus] or Olive-sided Flycatcher [Nuttallornis borealis], but larger than Empidonax spp. Posture erect, head appearing distinctly crested. Head, back, wings, and tail brown with an olive cast; wings and tail darker than back. Two whitish wing-bars, but no eye-ring. Sides of breast and upper abdomen brownish-olive, darker than in Eastern Wood Pewee [Contopus virens], and sharply separated from rest of underparts, which were white with a yellowish wash. Upper mandible black; lower mandible slightly paler, but definitely not yellowish or flesh-colored as in Eastern Wood Pewee."

Identification of the bird was based largely on the call. This we described as "two notes, the second slightly higher in pitch: a nasal or burry-sounding "pe-weeep", very different from the clearly whistled, higher-pitched "pe-weee" of the Eastern Wood Pewee, in which the difference in pitch of the two notes is much greater (second much higher). Weber was very familiar with this call-note of the Western Wood Pewee, and Gates had also heard it previously.

The bird's behavior also seemed different from that typical of Eastern Wood Pewees. It perched on dead upright snags and dead branches of trees in the open, 2 to 5 m above ground. (The habitat was open live oak (Quercus virginiana) woods, with trees 8 to 13 m tall.) Eastern Wood Pewees, although often perching in the open, in Weber's experience tend to perch more often within the canopy, and at greater heights than Western Wood Pewees.

A more complete account of our observation is on file at the bird collections of Mississippi State University and Louisiana State University.

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The Western Wood Pewee is a rare bird east of the Mississippi River. (Records from Audubon Field Notes and American Birds are cited below as AFN and AB, respectively.) There is one previous Mississippi record, a bird collected on 10 September 1960 at Cleveland by J. Alan Feduccia (AFN 15:49, 1961, Gandy and Turcotte 1970), which was reported as the first record east of the Mississippi. There is only one Louisiana record, a bird taken in Cameron Parish on 10 October 1965 (Lowery 1974), and the species is a rare migrant even in eastern Texas. Besides the two Mississippi records, we can find only 5 other published reports of occurrences east of the Mississippi: (1) 4 birds at Ocean City, Maryland between 12 and 26 September 1961 (AFN 16:17, 1962); (2) one collected at Ocean City, Maryland on 1 September 1967 (AFN 22:20, 1968); (3) a singing male seen at Point Pelee, Ontario on 17 May 1968 (AFN 22:522, 1968, James et al. 1976); (4) a singing male seen at Point Pelee on 15 May 1969 (AFN 23:585, 1969, James et al. 1976); and (5) a singing male seen at Monomoy, Massachusetts on 28 May 1976 (AB 30:814, 1976 and 31:231, 1977). All these eastern records were in the months of May and September; the coastal Mississippi record falls nicely into this seasonal pattern. It also seems significant that several of these eastern records (at least records (3), (4), and (5)) were of birds identified by voice. We suggest that Western Wood Pewees may occur more often in the East than indicated by these few records, but that they are often overlooked unless they happen to vocalize.

Literature Cited

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- Lowery, G.H., Jr. 1974. Louisiana Birds, 3rd ed. Louisiana State Univ. Press, Baton Rouge.