

# The Fork-tailed Flycatcher in North America

*An up-to-date summary of records reveals  
an intriguing pattern of occurrence*

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VERY FEW TROPICAL American birds are sufficiently migratory that they appear, either as vagrants or on a regular basis, on the North American continent north of Mexico. Perhaps the most frequently reported species, as well as the most spectacular, is the Fork-tailed Flycatcher (formerly *Muscivora tyrannus*; see Traylor 1979 for change to *Tyrannus savana*, which the A.O.U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature has voted to accept). We have found reference to forty occurrences<sup>1</sup> of the species north of Mexico, most of these in Atlantic or Gulf coastal regions, almost two-thirds, surprisingly, from the northeast between Nova Scotia and Maryland. A few scattered reports exist for the interior, and one has been recorded in California.

Several subspecies are recognized in the Fork-tailed Flycatcher. *T.s. monachus* Hartlaub, 1844, is the northern form breeding from southern Veracruz south through Middle America to Colombia, Venezuela and Surinam (except for coastal areas occupied by the following subspecies), and possibly northern Brazil, although individuals recorded there may be nonbreeding migrants; the movements of Middle American populations are not well understood but appear to be primarily southward migrations of more northerly breeding individuals. *T.s. sanctaemartae* (Zimmer), 1937, breeds in the Caribbean coastal region of Colombia and northwestern Venezuela, and appears to be primarily a resident form, although one vagrant has been reported from North America. *T.s. circumdatus* (Zimmer), 1937, is known only from the Amazonian region of Brazil and is presumably sedentary. The nominate race, *T.s. savana* Vieillot,

1808, breeds over much of southern South America from eastern Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and southern Brazil south to Patagonia, migrating extensively northward after breeding to northern South America (west to Colombia), Trinidad, Tobago, the southern Lesser Antilles and, casually, to Cuba, Bermuda and the North American continent.

The old specimen labelled "New Jersey" (see footnote under #8 in Table 1) has been identified as *T.s. sanctaemartae*; all other North American specimens, including the one from Texas, have been referred to the highly migratory southern race *T.s. savana*. Although it has been suggested that vagrants in Texas might represent the geographically adjacent *T.s. monachus*, the single specimen from that state supports the hypothesis that Middle American populations migrate southward and most North American reports pertain to the nominate subspecies.

We regard the "New Jersey" specimen mentioned previously as highly suspect. Unless it is indeed the Trenton, New Jersey, specimen taken in 1900 and subsequently reported as "lost", as has been suggested, there is no published report to which it could likely pertain. Furthermore, being representative of a subspecies with little or no migratory inclination, the chances of a stray reaching New Jersey are remote. We feel it is best to regard this specimen as probably mislabelled, and would suggest that occurrence of the subspecies *sanctaemartae* in

North America be relegated to hypothetical status.

AN INTERESTING PATTERN of occurrences may be seen by noting the dates of North American records, a pattern first pointed out to us by Kenneth C. Parkes. North American vagrants, representing mostly (or entirely) individuals of the most southerly race, have been presumed to be vagrants that "overshot" their normal "wintering" grounds in northern South America, an hypothesis advanced by Zimmer (1937). However, the great majority (33 of 40) of North American occurrences were in the months from July through November (or in "late summer" or "fall"), a time when one would expect migratory movement of the nominate race to be southward, the individuals returning to the breeding areas. It is inconceivable that all these reports were of individuals that reached North America in late winter or spring and wandered about undetected; they must represent birds rather recently arrived upon the North American scene. If so, we then have the phenomenon of incorrect directional migration after the nonbreeding ("wintering") season, resulting in their "spring" migration continuing in the same direction as that of the "fall" movement. We are unaware of reports of this phenomenon in any other migratory species (in either hemisphere), although perhaps a close check of dates of vagrant occurrences would reveal other instances. It is also interesting to note that *all* reports of Fork-tailed Flycatchers in North America since 1970 (the last 17 cases listed) were recorded during this late summer-fall period. We have no hypothesis to advance at this time to account for this unusual pattern.

<sup>1</sup>Two separate individuals seen and photographed on Cape Cod in late September-early October 1980 will be reported elsewhere and are not included herein.



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Table 1. North American records of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher.

| Map No. | Date                    | Locality   | Observers  | Status                           | References |
|---------|-------------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|------------|
| 1       | late Oct., year?        | Henderson, Ky.   | J.J. Audubon   | ☆, found dead                    | 2, 4, 11   |
| 2       | Dec., ca. 1820          | Bridgeton, N.J.  | J. Woodcraft   | ★                                | 5, 14, 4   |
| 3       | Aug., 1822              | near Natchez, Miss.                                      | J.J. Audubon   | ●, 2 birds                       | 2, 4       |
| 4       | June, 1832              | Camden, N.J.   | J.J. Audubon   | ☆, painted                       | 2, 4       |
| 5       | Fall, 1873              | Fox Chase, Pa.   | "Mr. Blake"  | ★                                | 6, 4       |
| 6       | July, 1879              | Lake Ridge, Lenawee Co., Mich.                           | —  | ☆, destroyed                     | 4          |
| 7       | late Summer, 1883       | Santa Monica, Calif.                                     | —  | ☆, destroyed                     | 4          |
| 8       | Fall, 1900              | Trenton, N.J.  | —  | ☆?, lost*                        | 3, 14, 6   |
| 9       | Dec. 1, 1908            | Marion, Washington Co., Me.                              | G. H. Graham   | ★                                | 10, 6      |
| 10      | Oct. 22, 1916           | Gay Head Lighthouse, Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, Mass. | Francis A. Foster  | ●                                | 8          |
| 11      | Nov. 1-3, 1939          | Cape May, N.J.   | Otway Brown  | ●                                | 6, 4       |
| 12      | Sept. 14, 1944          | East Quogue, Suffolk Co., N.Y.                           | Mrs. H. Walker, Mrs. H. Ward                                 | ●, day of hurricane              | 6, 7       |
| 13      | Aug. 10, 1946           | north of Uvalde, Uvalde Co., Tex.                        | S.G. Williams  | ●                                | 12         |
| 14      | Nov. 19, 1946           | southeastern Cameron Co., Tex.                           | Mr. & Mrs. C. T. Gill  | ●, sketched in field by Mr. Gill | 12         |
| 15      | Sept. 23, 1947          | Heckscher State Park, Suffolk Co., N.Y.                  | Don R. Eckelberry  | ●                                | 7          |
| 16      | Oct. 7, 1954            | Clermont, Columbia Co., N.Y.                             | Mrs. R. V. Ingersoll   | ●                                | 1A         |
| 17      | Oct. 8, 1958            | near Aransas N.W.R., Refugio Co., Tex.                   | Maurine McFarland (photo Edith Wilson)                       | ■                                | 1B, 12     |
| 18      | Mar. 20, 1959           | Rio Grande delta, Tex.                                   | Mr. & Mrs. E. D. Swedenborg                                  | ●                                | 12         |
| 19      | Feb. 4, 1961            | 18 mi. NNE Edinburg, Hidalgo Co., Tex.                   | David Blankinship, Pauline James                             | ♀ ☆                              | 9, 12      |
| 20      | Sept. 26-27, 1961       | Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard, Mass.                     | many observers   | ●, after Hurricane Esther        | 1C         |
| 21      | May 29, 1967            | West Orange, N.J.  | Richard Ryan   | ●                                | 1D, 1E     |
| 22      | Sept. 25, 1967          | Encinal Peninsula, Tex.                                  | many observers   | ●                                | 1F         |
| 23      | May 4-9, 1968           | Plum Island, Mass.                                       | Davis Brown, Gladys Bartlett, H. W. Harrington <i>et al.</i> | ●                                | 1G         |
| 24      | Sept. 6-11, 1970        | Biddeford Pool, Me.                                      | Kimball Elkins <i>et al.</i> (photo H. Cook Anderson)        | ■                                | 1H         |
| 25      | Sept. 26, 1970          | Dartmouth piggery, near Halifax, N.S.                    | Ian McLaren (photo Willett & Eric Mills)                     | ■                                | 1H         |
| 26      | Sept. 4, 1972           | Brigantine N.W.R., N.J.                                  | John Danzenbaker   | ●, 6:30 a.m.                     | 1J         |
| 27      | Sept. 4, 1972           | Cape May, N.J.   | Frank & Margaret Bleirr                                      | ●, 6:00 p.m.                     | 1J         |
| 28      | late Oct.-Nov. 1, 1973  | Bulls Island, Cape Romain N.W.R., S.C.                   | J. H. Dick, G. D. Stout <i>et al.</i>                        | ■                                | 1K         |
| 29      | July 15-16, 1974        | Sugarloaf Keys, Fla.                                     | Lois Kitching <i>et al.</i>                                  | ●                                | 1L         |
| 30      | Sept. 14-25, 1975       | Whiting, Me.   | Charles W. Dorchester <i>et al.</i> (photo Davis W. Finch)   | ■                                | 1M         |
| 31      | Aug. 24-26, 1976        | Seal Island, N.S.  | Ian A. McLaren   | ■, immature                      | 1P         |
| 32      | Sept. 9-15, 1976        | Martinsville, Me.  | Gwendolyn Cook, Mildred Hyde                                 | ■                                | 1P         |
| 33      | Sept. 17, 1976          | Rockledge, Fla.  | Robert D. Barber   | ●, immature                      | 1N         |
| 34      | Oct. 1-8, 1976          | Kennebunk, Me.   | R. S. Aaronian, A. M. Thomas, S. Higginbotham <i>et al.</i>  | ■                                | 1P         |
| 35      | Oct. 17, 1976           | Chokoloskee, Fla.  | Joe Van Os   | ■                                | 1N         |
| 36      | Oct. 28-30, 1977        | Dorion, Ont.   | R. Taylor (photo A. Maki)                                    | ■                                | 1R         |
| 37      | late Oct.-Nov. 15, 1977 | Grand Bay, N.B.  | David S. Christie  | ●                                | 1Q         |
| 38      | Sept. 23, 1978          | Sandy Point State Park, Md.                              | H. L. Wierenga, S. J. Mele, Wayne Klockner                   | ●, immature                      | 1T         |
| 39      | Oct. 11, 1978           | Cape May, N.J.   | D. Crowe <i>et al.</i> (photo Steve Laurer)                  | ■                                | 1S         |
| 40      | Nov. 13-16, 1978        | Columbia Co., Wis.                                       | Frank Freese   | ■                                | 1U         |

★ - Specimen; ☆ - Specimen destroyed, lost or discarded; ■ - photographed; ● - sight record only

\*Specimen in Hoopes Collection in Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia labelled "New Jersey" may be this "lost" specimen.



Figure 1. Occurrences of the Fork-tailed Flycatcher in North America north of Mexico through 1978.

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Painting by Alan Barron p. 843, Fork-tailed Flycatcher above, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher below.