

Gray Flycatcher in northwestern Ohio

Bruce G. Peterjohn and
Mary E. Gustafson

ON AUGUST 20, 1988 WE OBSERVED and photographed a bird that we identified as an adult Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*) in worn plumage along the "Bird Trail" at Magee Marsh Wildlife Management Area, Lucas County, Ohio. The "Bird Trail" is a migrant trap on the south shore of Lake Erie approximately 30 kilometers east of Toledo, Ohio. Access is provided through Crane Creek State Park. The trail traverses a disturbed woodlot located within 200 meters of the lakeshore. The open canopy is dominated by cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) while the understory is largely composed of box-elder (*Acer negundo*) and ashes (*Fraxinus* spp.). The woodlot separates a beach and shallow freshwater pond from extensive diked marshes to the south. As a result of its location and isolation, this woodlot regularly attracts large concentrations of migrant passerines and has hosted a number of rarities through the years.

Our attention was drawn to the unfamiliar vocalizations given by this *Empidonax* flycatcher. The phrases were generally single notes but occasionally doubled, a high pitched and rather squeaky "chee" or "chee-up", quite unlike any song or call given by the eastern *Empidonax* flycatchers. Our first impression of this bird was of a uniform pale gray flycatcher. Suspecting a western stray, we carefully studied and photographed this flycatcher between 10:45 a.m. and 1:15 p.m., EDT noting all visible characteristics and vocalizations.

The following description of the bird was derived from our field notes and an examination of the photographs. Most of these characteristics are visible in the photographs.

Size: In direct comparison, the Gray Flycatcher was slightly but noticeably larger than a Least Flycatcher (*E. minimus*). Its overall size appeared similar to a Willow Flycatcher (*E.*

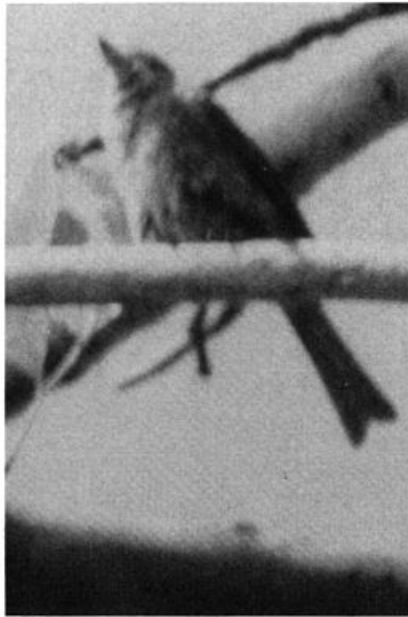


Figure 1. Adult Gray Flycatcher at Magee Marsh Wildlife Management Area, Lucas County, Ohio. In bright sunlight, the flycatcher appeared pale gray with little contrast between underparts and upperparts. Note the relatively long, thin, straight-sided bill with sharply demarcated black tip to the lower mandible. Photograph/Mary E. Gustafson.

traillii) also observed on the trail that day, but a direct comparison with this species was not possible.

Shape: One of the most striking features of the Gray Flycatcher was its relatively long tail, which made up about one-half of the total length of the bird. Otherwise, it was fairly slim-bodied and not particularly large-headed. The head gave a slightly crested impression from some angles.

Plumage: The plumage was decidedly worn, especially the tail and flight feathers. The crown was gray-brown, perceptibly darker than the pale gray ear coverts. The lores were darker gray, creating a small dark patch extending between the base of the bill and the eye. The eye ring was dirty grayish-white and complete but indistinct, not contrasting sharply with the

face. The eye ring connected with a vague supraloral line, creating the impression of vireo-like "spectacles". The chin and throat were a dirty grayish-white, distinctly lighter than the breast, sides, and upper belly which were pale gray. The undertail coverts, flanks, and lower belly were white-washed with pale yellow on the center of the belly. A narrow gray-white line extended from the belly through the center of the breast, creating a vested appearance, but it did not connect with the pale throat. The gray breast band and cheeks blended into similar gray upperparts, resulting in a fairly uniform pale gray coloration on much of the bird. The wings and tail were brown, the tail at times appearing red-brown in bright light. The greater and median secondary coverts were terminally edged buffy-gray, creating two narrow light wing bars on each wing. The tail was distinctly notched, and the outer rectrices had paler outer webs.

Soft Parts: The legs and feet were black, and the tarsi were long. The bill was very long for an *Empidonax* flycatcher, and narrow and straight-sided when viewed from below. The upper mandible was entirely black. The lower mandible was bicolored, the basal half bright orange in sharp contrast with the black tip.

Vocalizations: The previously described vocalizations seem to be partial songs or song phrases given by a male after the breeding season. Gray Flycatchers have been noted to give partial and complete songs during fall migration and on their wintering grounds (K. Kaufman, pers. comm.). Such vocalizations are not unusual among the eastern *Empidonax* flycatchers. The call notes of this individual were not positively heard. When it interacted with several Least Flycatchers, numerous dry "whit" notes were heard but these notes could not be attributed with certainty to

either species.

Behavior: The Gray Flycatcher was observed foraging at heights of 2–5 meters within the understory. We never saw this flycatcher flick its wings. On at least six occasions, it slowly bobbed its tail first downwards and then up, similar to the tail bob of an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*). These movements were single bobs, given sporadically. Throughout the observation, this flycatcher did not regularly associate with any other birds although there were other migrants on the trail. It occasionally chased Least Flycatchers when both occupied the same tree.

The Gray Flycatcher was briefly observed on August 21 by Ray Hannikman and August 22 by Larry Rosche, but disappeared into the vegetation and could not be subsequently relocated on either date. We are not aware of any reliable sightings after August 22.

Of all eastern *Empidonax* flycatchers, only the Least Flycatcher can have a lower mandible approaching the pattern observed on this individual (J. Dunn, pers. comm.). However, the relatively long, straight-sided bill is noticeably different from the short spade-shaped bill of Least Flycatcher (Pyle *et al.* 1987). In addition, the vocalizations, larger size, long tail, and lack of contrast in the plumage are all inconsistent with Least Flycatcher.

Among the western *Empidonax* flycatchers, the brightly colored Western Flycatcher (*E. difficilis*/*E. occidentalis*) complex is readily eliminated by plumage characteristics and bill shape. Adult Hammond's Flycatchers (*E. hammondi*) molt on their breeding grounds before undertaking their fall migration and should not appear extremely worn away from their nesting range (Whitney and Kaufman 1985). This individual's worn plumage, long bill, coloration of the lower mandible, and long tail would rule out Hammond's Flycatcher.

The final and most difficult problem is to distinguish between Dusky (*E. oberholseri*) and Gray flycatchers. While the observed characteristics are all consistent with a Gray Flycatcher (Whitney and Kaufman 1987), Dusky Flycatchers can also exhibit these features. Gray Flycatchers tend to have

longer bills, but there is considerable overlap between the two species (Pyle *et al.* 1987). While the coloration of the lower mandible is frequently similar in both species, the Gray Flycatcher consistently has a sharply demarcated black tip, and the Dusky gradually fades from dark tip to pale base. The timing of their molt is similar, and there are no known consistent plumage differences between these species that could be readily discerned in the field. While the Gray Flycatcher tends to have dark lores and a fairly conspicuous light supraloral line, and the Dusky tends to have paler lores, the reliability of these facial character-

One of the most striking features of the Gray Flycatcher was its relatively long tail which made up about one-half of the total length of the bird . . . the Gray Flycatcher is a reasonably distinctive species in comparison with other members of this genus.

istics remains to be adequately tested.

The positive identification of this individual as a Gray Flycatcher results from its phoebe-like tail bob, a tail movement that is unique among *Empidonax* flycatchers. While the determination of the direction of tail movement can be difficult under some circumstances, especially when the bird is excited and its tail is moving quite rapidly, these circumstances do not apply to this observation. This flycatcher seldom bobbed its tail, usually shortly after alighting on a perch, and its tail movement was noted as being consistently first downward and then up.

We recognize that field identification of extralimital *Empidonax* flycatchers is a tenuous proposition and that many individuals can only be positively identified in the hand. Fortunately, the Gray Flycatcher is a rea-

sonably distinctive species in comparison with other members of this genus. Field identification of this species is possible, given careful study of plumage, voice, and tail movements as well as good photos to substantiate important bill and tail characteristics. However, field identification should be confirmed by examining these flycatchers in the hand whenever possible.

This sighting provides only the third published record of the Gray Flycatcher east of the Mississippi River. The previous records are of one banded at Toronto, Ontario on September 11, 1981 (Goodwin 1982) and another captured in Littleton, Massachusetts on October 31, 1969 (Finch 1970).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Kenn Kaufman and Jon Dunn for their written comments on our photographs and descriptions; and Kevin Zimmer, Barry Zimmer, and Paul Lehman for reviewing the photographs. Kenn Kaufman provided useful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- FINCH, D. W. 1970. Northeastern Maritime Region. *Audubon Field Notes* 24: 18.
- GOODWIN, C. E. 1982. Ontario Region. *American Birds* 36: 173.
- PYLE, P., S. N. G. HOWELL, R. P. YUNICK, and D. F. DESANTE. 1987. Identification Guide to North American Passerines. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, California. 278 pp.
- WHITNEY, B. and K. KAUFMAN. 1985. The *Empidonax* Challenge: Looking at *Empidonax*; Part II: Least, Hammond's, and Dusky Flycatchers. *Birding* 17: 277–287.
- WHITNEY, B. and K. KAUFMAN. 1987. The *Empidonax* Challenge: Looking at *Empidonax*; Part V: Gray and Buff-breasted Flycatchers. *Birding* 19(5): 7–15.

—105 K E. Ticonderoga Dr.,
Westerville, OH 43081 (Peterjohn),
Ohio State University, Department of
Zoology, 1735 Neil Avenue,
Columbus, OH 43210 (Gustafson)