

Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

Text and Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

Western Kingbird Identification

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WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN I FELL in with a gang of Texas birders who had the tradition, initiated by the late Edgar Kincaid, of giving bird-names to all their friends. In due course they named me the Western Kingbird. Nothing regal was implied by that name, of course: this was during my hitch-hiking days, and the Western Kingbird was a species that wandered widely and was often found along roadsides.

True enough. The Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) is a widespread bird, occupying in summer the western 60% of the Lower 48 States, as well as substantial chunks of southwestern Canada and northern Mexico. It is among the most regular of the "western" strays along the Atlantic coast every fall, and a few usu-



Figure 1. Western Kingbird (top) and Cassin's Kingbird (bottom), showing adults in fresh plumage.

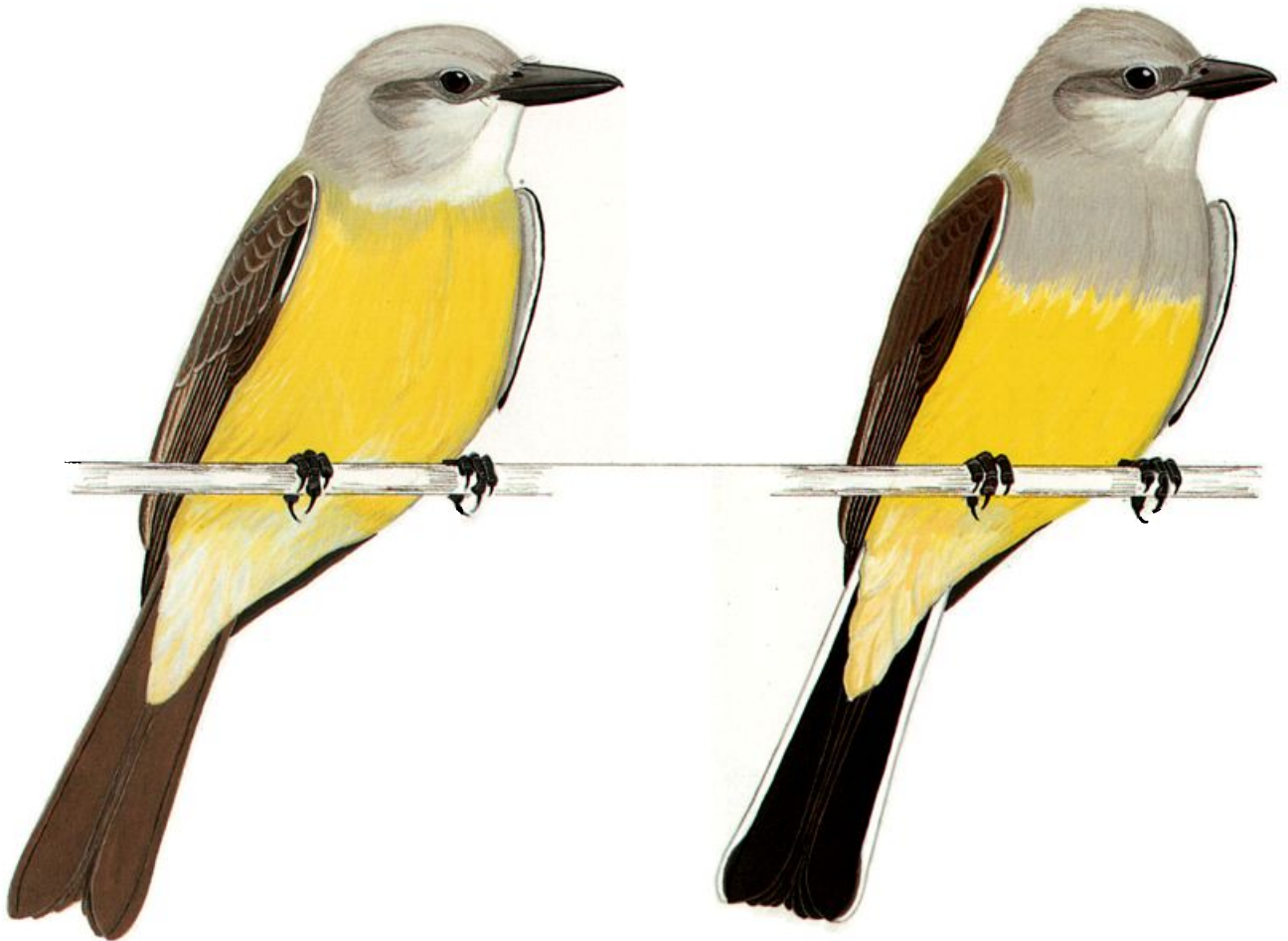


Figure 2. Tropical Kingbird (left) and Western Kingbird (right). Seen alone, the Tropical (with its large head and long bill) gives the impression of a bigger bird, but side by side with Western it is seen to be about the same size.

ally winter in southern Florida. And it does like roadsides—perching conspicuously on roadside fences, or on streetside wires in suburbs, or even in busy downtown areas. Widespread, common, favoring open areas, the Western Kingbird should be very easy to recognize.

But kingbirds are of the tyrant flycatcher family, so of course they present hidden difficulties. Three other kingbirds in North America are very similar to the Western. These are Cassin's Kingbird (*T. vociferans*), Tropical Kingbird (*T. melancholicus*), and Couch's Kingbird (*T. couchii*).

The standard bird guide treatment is to emphasize the tail patterns of these kingbirds, and under ideal conditions this is a good approach. But when conditions are less than ideal—when the tail is heavily worn, or molting a few feathers, or hidden be-

hind a branch, or sideways to the observer, or even attached to a bird that is sitting still as the observer zips by at 60 miles an hour—it can be frustrating to try to judge this one field mark. In this *Practiced Eye* we'll look at other differences among these birds.

Western Kingbird, the most widely familiar of the four, is the best starting point for comparisons. It's the smallest-billed of our kingbirds, suggesting a specialization on smaller (and more abundant) insects, a menu which would allow it to get by in built-up suburbs and wide-open spaces (including treeless zones, where it often builds its nest behind the crossbar of a telephone pole.)

The tail pattern of this species, featuring white outer edges, is well-known—but it's important to note that these edges comprise only the outer web of one outermost feather

on each side. Thus, the loss of two feathers can remove this "diagnostic" mark. Even normal wear and abrasion can reduce this white outer edge to obscurity. Western Kingbirds go through their annual molt in late summer (adults) or after reaching the wintering grounds (young birds); adults with very worn tails might be seen any time after early summer, and those with the outer feathers absent through molt are likely in late summer. However, even birds in relatively fresh plumage may accidentally lose some of their tail feathers at any time of year.

A distinction not often mentioned is that Western Kingbird has plainer wings, season for season, than the other species. In fresh plumage, the other three all have conspicuous pale edgings on the coverts on the wing, created a scalloped and striped effect,

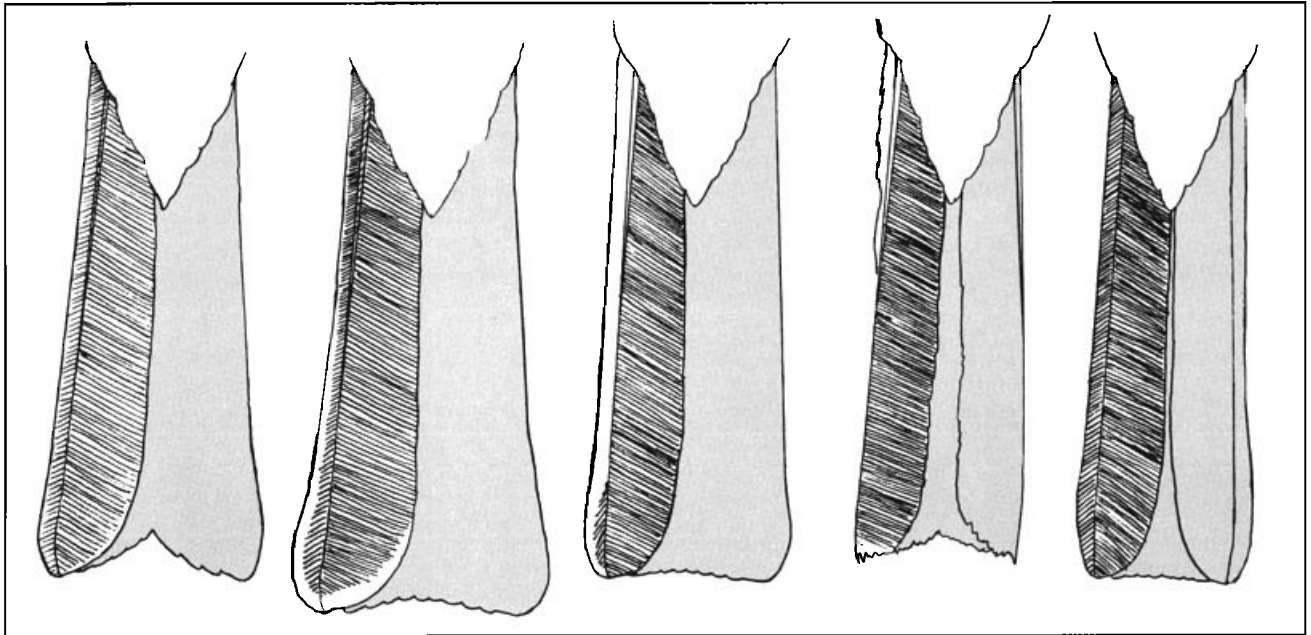


Figure 3. Tail details. From left: tails of Tropical, Cassin's, and Western kingbirds, as seen from below, to show overall tail shape, with one outer rectrix detailed to show its shape and pattern. These represent adult birds in fresh plumage. Juveniles show a more tapered tip to each rectrix. Note that the individual feathers in the tail of Cassin's Kingbird are wider than in the other species, no doubt contributing to the bird's broad-tailed appearance; notice also that Cassin's does have a pale outer edge on part of the tail. The fourth figure from the left represents a Western Kingbird tail in worn condition, with the white edges almost gone. This degree of wear is not exceptional, and might even be considered typical in late summer. The figure at right represents a Western Kingbird that is in fresh plumage but has accidentally lost the outermost tail feather on each side. Such a pattern would be rare, but not impossible. These illustrations show why it would be possible to mistake a Western for one of the other kingbirds, even with a good view of the tail pattern.

while the edges of the coverts on Western Kingbird are barely paler than the centers of these feathers. This is subject to the effects of wear, of course: in worn plumage (generally after mid-summer on adults), the pale edges may be worn away enough to make any of these birds look plain-winged.

The rest of the plumage of Western Kingbird is relatively pale. Most of the head is pale gray, setting off a diffuse darker "mask" around the eye. The center of the throat is whitish and the upper breast is pale gray, but there is no sharp contrast anywhere in this area. The upper back and scapulars are pale olive-gray when fresh, losing much of the olive tone in worn plumage.

As with most flycatchers, voice is important in identification. The Western Kingbird's common call-note is a sharp, metallic *kip* or *kep*. Its more elaborate calls are not so easily transcribed: it gives long, staccato, sputtering, chattering series that are often described as having a "bickering" sound. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

(*Tyrannus forficatus*) has a call very similar to this, but the other kingbirds do not.

Cassin's Kingbird is a very common breeder in the southwest, extending north locally to southeastern Montana and north-central California. Its range thus overlaps widely with that of Western Kingbird. The two can even be found nesting in the same groves of trees, but Cassin's generally inhabits more wooded areas at slightly higher elevations.

Cassin's is darker about the head, chest, and back than Western or the other kingbirds, but this can be hard to judge without a direct comparison, because it seems to vary so much with light conditions. It's easier to see areas of contrast. Whereas the dark "mask" of Western stands out on a pale background, Cassin's shows little contrast between this area (lores and ear-coverts) and the rest of the head. There is a strong contrast, however, between the Cassin's white malar region and the dark gray area just behind it, and this contrasting white

"whisker" area below the eye can be noticed at a great distance. Another point that may show up well, unless the bird is in worn plumage, is the patterned look on the wing (created by pale tips and edges to all the coverts). Cassin's is a bulkier bird than Western, with a thicker bill and broader tail, and this difference becomes noticeable with experience.

The specific name, *vociferans*, is well chosen. Cassin's has a wide variety of calls, most with a loud and rough quality. An abrupt *chibeew* is given frequently all year. Pairs on nesting territory often give an excited-sounding *kedeer-kedeer-kedeer*. The "dawn song," given at first daylight and occasionally later, is very notes, like *berg-berg-Berg-BERG-BERG!* Birders hearing this for the first time in an Arizona pre-dawn have sometimes confused it with the voice of the Buff-collared Nightjar (*Caprimulgus ridgwayi*).

Tropical Kingbird is very common and widespread in the American tropics (and is becoming more so,

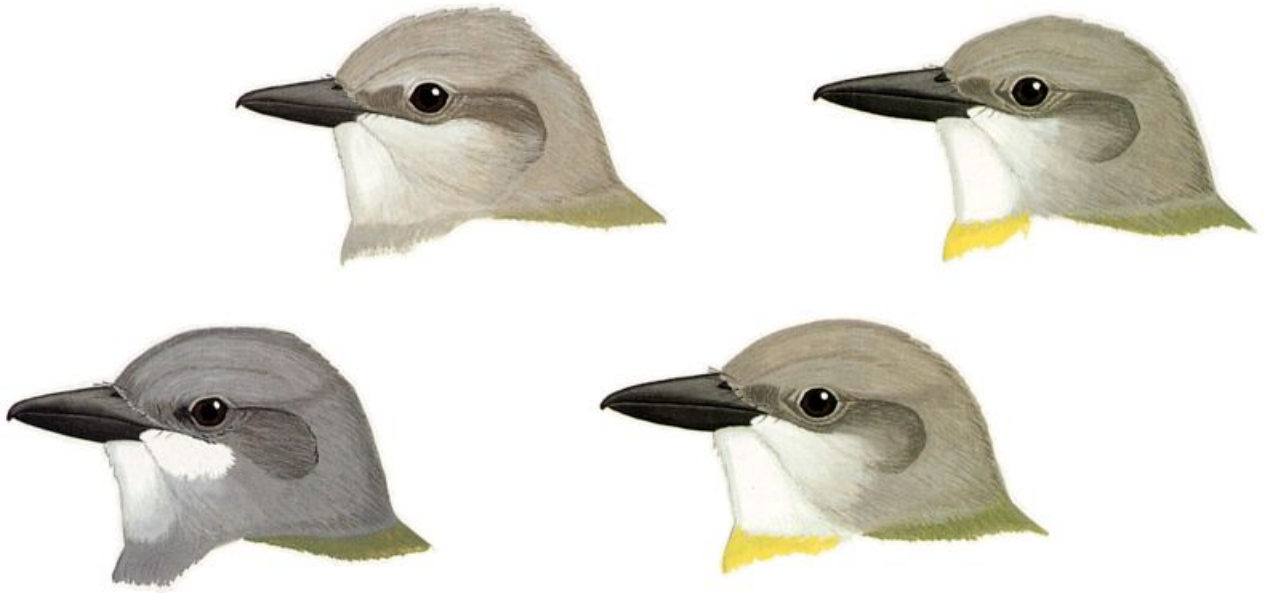


Figure 4. Comparing the bill shapes, face patterns, and usual head shapes of four kingbirds. Upper left: Western Kingbird. Upper right: Tropical Kingbird. Lower left: Cassin's Kingbird. Lower right: Couch's Kingbird. Tropical and Couch's are extremely similar in all visual respects. Tropical is, on average, a slightly smaller bird but with a slightly longer and thinner bill, and this difference in ratio can impart a subtly different look to their facial expressions, as shown here. However, this would not be a safe criterion for identifying either one out of range.

unfortunately, as more forest is cleared). But north of Mexico it breeds regularly only at a few points in southern Arizona. Every fall a few Tropical Kingbirds stray up the Pacific Coast—regularly to California, occasionally to British Columbia, once apparently to Alaska. Vagrants have also reached the Atlantic Coast. Recently one or two pairs have been present (and even nesting) in southernmost Texas, underlining a point that had been apparent to Mexican birders for some time: Tropical Kingbird overlaps in breeding range with its identical twin, Couch's Kingbird.

Couch's Kingbird is mainly a specialty of eastern Mexico, extending north into Texas and south into Guatemala and Belize. It is so similar visually to Tropical Kingbird that even some museum specimens of the two cannot be separated, and they were long treated as races of one species. They have strikingly different voices, however, and on this basis the Texas field ornithologist L. Irby Davis had argued for years that they must be dif-

ferent species. Not until 1983 did the scientific community formally agree.

Separating the Tropical/Couch's complex from the other kingbirds is usually straightforward. Birds of this pair are pale like the Western Kingbird, with an ill-defined darker "mask" but no other contrast on the face. Unlike Western Kingbird, they are mostly yellow on the chest, not gray, and more extensively white on the throat. They also show pale edgings on the wing coverts, at least in fresh plumage. They are longer-billed than either Cassin's or Western.

Tropical and Couch's are most reliably separated by voice. All of the Tropical's calls are variations on a thin, twittering trill, sounding much thinner and more even than the robust sputtering of the Western. Couch's Kingbird—which is, in my experience, a more vocal bird than Tropical at most seasons—often gives a sharp *kip*, similar to that of Western. It also has a metallic rolling *breeeyer*, and a rapid series building to a crescendo, *puwit-puwit-puwit-paWITcheew*.

Separating these two by sight is vastly more difficult. Some average differences between the two, like the slightly greener back of Couch's, are useless for field identification. Couch's is a slightly larger bird on average, and to me it looks bulkier. It averages slightly shorter-billed than Tropical, however, and this creates a subtly different ratio of bill size to overall size, leading to a slightly different facial expression. But I notice this mainly after I already know which species I'm seeing! Finding ironclad visual field marks for Couch's and Tropical kingbirds is still an open challenge for North American birders.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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