

# FIRST UNITED STATES RECORD OF TUFTED FLYCATCHER

by Barry Zimmer and Kelly Bryan

ATYPICAL WEATHER SETTLED IN at the Rio Grande Village, Big Bend National Park, Texas, during the first weekend of November, 1991. Early Sunday morning, November 3, the overnight low dipped to the mid-20s°F, with overcast skies and windy conditions. Barbara Duplisea of Riverton, Wyoming, who had arrived at Rio Grande Village October 17, started her daily birding rounds, despite the weather conditions. She had birded the same general area almost daily since her arrival to Big Bend National Park. At approximately 9 A.M., Duplisea located a small flycatcher which was unfamiliar to her, and which was not illustrated in any popular American field guide.

At the time of discovery the weather conditions had not improved much, and the temperature had only risen to the low 30s°F. When first located, the small, bright-cinnamon flycatcher with a crest was picking insects from and flycatching above the pavement of a service road that ran through thick brush east of the camp-

ing area. The bird was not very active, and seemed to benefit somewhat from the warmth of the pavement.

A later check of the area, at approximately 2 P.M., found the bird at the

same location; however, by 4 P.M. the bird had moved approximately thirty yards northeast to a small pond located along the edge of the service road. The small flycatcher preferred perches just over the water, where it hawked insects both on and over the pond's warm surface.

November 4 dawned sunny and considerably warmer. The flycatcher was relocated in cottonwoods in the camping area and was actively flycatching from perches underneath the canopy of the tall trees. At this time, another park visitor produced Peterson's *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*, and the bird was tentatively identified as a Tufted Flycatcher (*Mitrephanes phaeocercus*) from central and southern Mexico. The bird was observed by several persons, including National Park Service staff, on the following two days and was photographed and even videotaped during this period by at least four observers. To our knowledge, the occurrence of this species at the location was first reported to rare bird tapes on the evening of November 6.

The authors arrived on the morning of November 7, but initially



Tufted Flycatcher at Big Bend National Park in Texas. Photograph by Mary Gustafson.

could not locate the bird at its preferred location over the pond. At approximately 10:30 A.M., the flycatcher was spotted in thick mesquite along the service road behind the camping area. However, it immediately flew to the rows of tall cottonwoods in the camping area, where it spent the rest of the morning. Zimmer, who has considerable experience with the species in Mexico, confirmed the identification at this time. Although the initial identification was never in doubt, to our knowledge none of the previous observers had had any experience with the species. In the afternoon, the bird favored thick stands of mesquite and huisache near the eastern edge of the camping area, where Bryan watched the



This Tufted Flycatcher was seen at Big Bend from November 1991 through January 1992. Photograph by Mary Gustafson.

bird for three hours. It preferred shaded perches, often low to the ground, but hawked insects over the open, sunny portion of the campsites. The authors extensively photographed and tape recorded the bird as it actively fed.

During the next few months, hundreds of birders were able to obtain excellent looks at the bird. On the afternoon of November 10, the bird located another preferred haunt—the large stand of cottonwoods near Daniel's Ranch on the opposite end of Rio Grande Valley. This area is approximately one mile from the location where the bird was initially discovered. With each new day, birders were kept guessing as to which location the bird would be spotted. On some days, it would spend the morning at Daniel's Ranch and the afternoon at the pond near the service road behind the camping area. In late December it was recorded on the annual Christmas Bird Count, obviously a first for any such count in the

United States. Many excellent photos, as well as additional recordings, were obtained during the bird's stay.

The flycatcher was last reliably reported on January 17, 1992 (*vide* BBNP files), capping a two and one-half month stay in the United States.

The following description is taken from notes made during observations of the flycatcher. The overall appearance (size, shape, and posture) of the bird was very reminiscent of an *Empidonax* flycatcher, but with an obvious, somewhat spiky crest. The head, back, and rump were an ochraceous-brown with strong olive tones. The wings and tail were considerably darker, almost sooty-black. Two prominent buffy wing bars and whitish-buff edging to the secondaries were apparent on the folded wings. The bird had fairly long primary extension with the wing tips reaching about one-fourth of the way down the long, slightly notched tail. The throat, cheeks, breast, and flanks were a rich cinnamon-orange, paling

to ochre-yellow on the lower belly and undertail coverts. It had a conspicuous, buffy eye-ring that widened both in front of and behind the dark eye. The thin bill looked fairly broad (almost triangular-shaped) when viewed from below. The upper portion of the mandible was dusky-black and the lower portion entirely yellow-orange.

The bird vocalized quite often, with the most frequent call being a rather subdued "twee, twee, twee, twee." Other more complex vocalizations were recorded by Lasley on November 28. All tape recordings have been deposited into the Texas Bird Sound Library at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

On the southern end of its range, the Tufted Flycatcher is replaced by a very closely related species, the Olive Flycatcher (*M. olivaceus*). The Olive Flycatcher, restricted to the east slopes of the Andes from northern Peru to northeastern Bolivia, is much less brownish, especially dorsally, than is the Tufted. Within its range, only the Belted Flycatcher (*Xenotriccus callizonus*) of southeastern Mexico and Guatemala is at all similar to the Tufted Flycatcher. That species, however, has a white throat contrasting strongly with an orange-brown breast-band. The Buff-breasted Flycatcher (*Empidonax fulvifrons*), which is widespread in Mexico and occurs in southeastern Arizona, lacks a crest and has much paler underparts.

The Tufted Flycatcher is resident from northwestern Mexico to the Andes of western Ecuador (A.O.U., 1983). Within Mexico it occurs in the Sierra Madre Occidental from northeastern Sonora and western Chihuahua south to Chiapas. It is more localized in the Sierra Madre Orien-

tal of eastern Mexico, but is regular at least as far north as the vicinity of Ciudad Victoria in southern Tamaulipas. Tufted Flycatchers are typically upper-elevation birds of montane pine-oak woodlands and cloud forests. Movement to the lowlands in winter, however, is of annual occurrence in varying numbers throughout most of the northern portion of its range. Small numbers of birds invade riparian habitat along the Rio Sabinas in southern Tamaulipas (elevation 300 feet) each winter.

Each mixed-species flock there usually includes a core pair of Tufted Flycatchers (John Arvin, pers. comm.). In western Mexico, the seasonal movement seems less regular, with large numbers reaching the lowlands during some winters, and in others the bird is nearly absent (Steve Howell, pers. comm.) Coincidentally, Howell noted a significant lowland movement in the valley of Oaxaca this (*which*) winter, with few birds remaining in the upper elevations of that area.

Hence, the occurrence of the Tufted Flycatcher at Rio Grande Village (elevation 1875 feet), which at first glance seems off for a montane species, fits into a normal pattern. Any guess as to the origin of this particular individual would be purely speculative, as the Big Bend area of Texas lies roughly halfway between known populations of Tufted Flycatchers to the southeast in southern Tamaulipas and to the west in southwestern Chihuahua. Little-explored, isolated ranges in the central plateau, such as the Sierra del Carmens directly southeast of the park, may contain small populations as well (c.f. Lasley *et al.* 1982).

As with any Mexican species seen in the United States, the possibility of it being an escaped caged bird must be addressed. Given the Tufted Flycatcher's lack of brilliant colors or impressive song, and most importantly its wholly insectivorous diet, the likelihood of the species ever occurring in



**Tufted Flycatcher has obvious, somewhat spiky crest. Photograph by Mary Gustafson.**

captivity is almost nil. This, combined with the known pattern of winter movement to lower elevations, would point to the Rio Grande Village bird as a naturally occurring vagrant and, thus, a first United States record.

#### Acknowledgments

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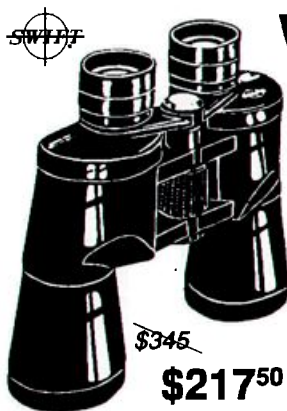
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