



The Tropical Kingbird North of Mexico

There are only a handful of spots in Arizona and Texas where Tropical Kingbirds can be found reliably—but vagrant individuals turn up all over North America. This stray, wintering at Santa Barbara, California, was photographed in January 1993.

Photograph/Brian E. Small

STEVEN G. MLODINOW*

The Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) is a large, attractive flycatcher with a vibrant personality that matches its bright coloration. Most birders from the United States and Canada associate this sought-after species with southeastern Arizona. In fact, it has a very wide range in the New World and has occurred as a wanderer across a surprisingly large part of the United States and Canada.

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†For the purposes of this article, non-calling kingbirds from Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, California, and Nevada have been assumed to be Tropical. Thus, it is entirely possible that one or two Couch's have been included under the guise of Tropical. While this might slightly skew the pattern for Tropical Kingbird, eliminating all non-calling birds would distinctly alter our ability to look at this species' status, especially since it is not known which of the many California records pertain to vocalizing individuals. To date, only one Couch's Kingbird has been identified from the Pacific Coast states and provinces—an individual that spent the winter of 1997–1998 in Orange County, California. Western Interior records of Tropical, away from Arizona, have a much less established pattern, and Couch's have been seen (and heard) as far west as Bosque del Apache and Cliff, New Mexico. The possibility of Couch's Kingbird should always be kept in mind when looking at migrant or vagrant Tropical-type kingbirds.

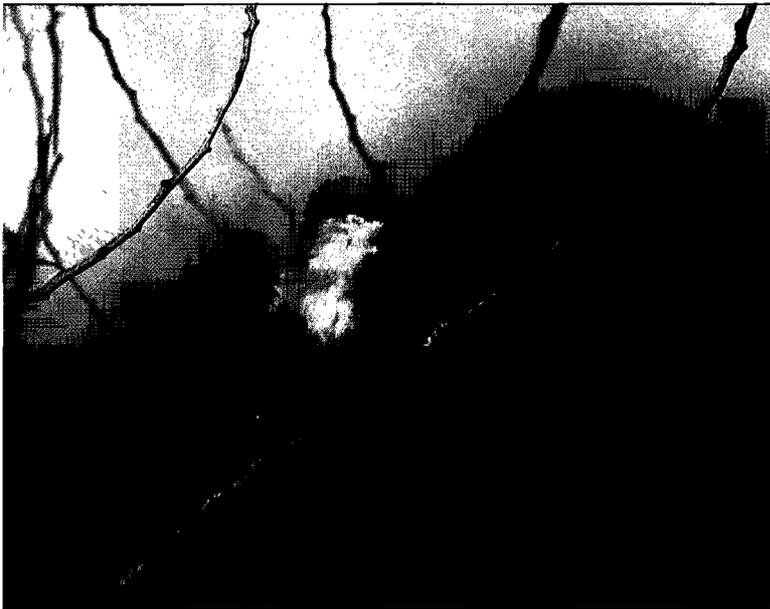
‡Please note that several records have come from Pacific Coast states in areas east of the Peninsular, Sierra, and Cascade ranges. These sightings better fit the Western Interior pattern and are discussed there.

As its name implies, the Tropical Kingbird is primarily a bird of the tropics (technically, the Neotropics). Its breeding range stretches as far south as central Peru and central Argentina and as far north as southeastern Arizona and, recently, extreme southern Texas. This species is resident through most of its range, but the population in Arizona completely evacuates its breeding range during winter, and Tropical Kingbirds in northwestern Mexico at least partially withdraw during winter as well (Howell and Webb 1995). Furthermore, the southernmost populations in South America are known to be partly migratory (AOU 1983). Vagabond individuals in North America have been found as far northwest as Alaska and as far northeast as Maine and Quebec. Records have also come from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, Michigan, Connecticut, North Carolina, and Florida. As is often the case with birds having such an extensive range, the status and distribution of the Tropical Kingbird in the United States and Canada is best considered in parts.†

PACIFIC COAST‡

Along the Pacific Slope of the United States and Canada, Tropical Kingbirds typically occur during the fall as *northbound* migrants. Presumably, these are individuals that have migrated north instead

Tropical Kingbird compared to similar species



At first glance, a stray Tropical Kingbird might be mistaken for the much more numerous Western Kingbird (see below). A second look would reveal that the tail is dusky brown, and notched at the tip. The yellow of the underparts extends well up onto the chest, and grades into olive there, whereas the Western Kingbird has the chest mostly pale gray. The larger bill of the Tropical may also draw attention.
Photograph/Brian E. Small



At Celestun, Yucatan, eastern Mexico, both Tropical and Couch's kingbirds are possible, so this Tropical was identified carefully by voice. Even without that confirmation, we might guess that it was a Tropical because this individual looks so long-billed; there is much overlap, but some Tropicals are longer-billed than any Couch's Kingbird.
Photograph/Rick and Nora Bowers



Couch's Kingbird is virtually identical to Tropical Kingbird except for vocal differences. Seeing a Couch's in an area where it is expected—such as this bird at Bentsen/Rio Grande Valley State Park, Texas—one might notice subtle differences in proportion. Couch's is, on average, a slightly larger bird with a very slightly shorter and stouter bill. This difference in ratio can create a subtly different facial expression.
Photograph/Brian E. Small

Rear view of a Couch's Kingbird. The "greener back" of this species is sometimes quoted as a difference from Tropical Kingbird, but variations in plumage and the effects of lighting conditions make this useless as a field mark. Voice is the only completely diagnostic difference in the field. Tropicals are sometimes aggravatingly silent, but Couch's Kingbirds tend to be fairly vocal at all seasons.
Photograph/Brian E. Small



The "yellow-bellied" kingbird that wanders most widely in North America is the Western, and some out-of-range Tropicals may have been passed off as that species. As seen here, the white outer edges of the outer tail feathers on Western Kingbird can be very narrow (or practically absent when the bird is in very worn plumage). However, the tail is still black, not dusky brown, and Western Kingbird also has a smaller bill and much more extensive pale gray on the chest than Tropical Kingbird.
Photograph/Brian E. Small

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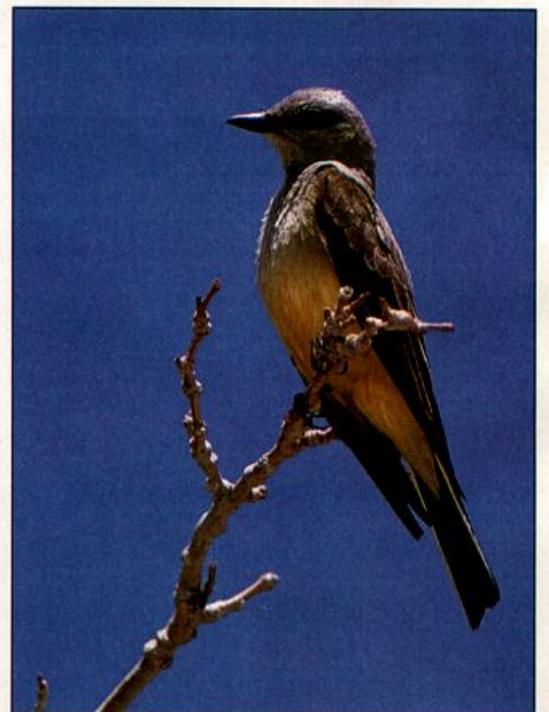


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there are five records, all between early June and early October: October 1, 1947, at Topock; August 16, 1954, at Bill Williams Delta; June 10, 1973, at Tacna; June 5, 1978, at Bill Williams Delta; and June 6 to 9, 1980, in the Dome Valley. As suggested by Rosenberg et al. (1991), the early summer records may represent migrants overshooting beyond breeding areas in Arizona or northwestern Mexico.

Records away from Arizona are far-flung. The region's most northwesterly Tropical appeared at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Harney County, Oregon, on September 27, 1995 (*NASFN* 50 108). The easternmost regional record is of three birds at Big Bend National Park, Texas, from June 24 to August 3, 1996. Two of these attempted to nest but failed (*NASFN* 50:971). Other non-Arizona Tropicals include eight from eastern California and two from Nevada. Additionally, a bird that may well have been a Tropical was photographed at Rodeo, New Mexico, in December 1980 (Monson and Phillips 1981). However, given the existence of fall and winter Couch's Kingbird records from Bosque del Apache, New Mexico (*AB* 40 153, *AB* 40:314) and near Cliff, Grant County, New Mexico (K. Kaufman, pers. comm.), the possibility that this bird might have been a Couch's cannot be comfortably eliminated.

Outside of the Big Bend record, non-Arizona Tropical Kingbirds have been seen only during spring and fall. Spring records stretch from mid-March to mid-June and fall records span late September to mid-December.

SOUTH TEXAS

Before the 1980s, the Tropical Kingbird was known from Texas only on the basis of a 1909 specimen from Brownsville (G. Lasley, *in litt.*). Then, during the 1980s, a few unverified reports of this species surfaced, but the Tropical Kingbird's presence in southern Texas really remained unestablished until February 9, 1991, when two were found in Brownsville, Cameron County (*AB* 45:292). Later that summer, they nested and fledged two young (*AB* 45:1137). By 1994, there were four pairs nesting in Cameron County (*NASFN* 48:318), and by 1995, Tropical Kingbirds were known to breed at six south Texas sites, five in Cameron County and one in Hidalgo County (*NASFN* 49 951). These nesting birds have generally proven to be resident at their breeding areas, and sightings away from these locations remain scarce. The farthest afield include a record from Falcon Dam, Starr County, on June 26, 1991 (*AB* 45:1137), and an unverified report from Falfurrias, Brooks County, during the spring and summer of 1992 (*AB* 46:449, *AB* 46:1155). Outside of one recent record from Big Bend (see discussion under *Western Interior*), there are currently no Texas records away from these southernmost locales. In the future, however, it would not be surprising to find that some of the silent Tropical/Couch's Kingbirds straying northward along the Gulf Coast are Tropicals.

Most Tropical Kingbirds in Texas have been found at sites somewhat bereft of natural habitat, including football fields, power stations, golf courses, and suburban neighborhoods (G. Lasley, pers. comm.). This is in distinct contrast to the closely related Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*), which favors more natural habitat. This discrepancy can be explained, at least in part, by the habitat preferences these species show in eastern Mexico, where they are sympatric. The Couch's Kingbird prefers thornscrub forest, where it mostly feeds from the canopy, whereas the Tropical Kingbird is more a bird of open habitats such as beach scrub and savannah (S.N.G. Howell, pers. comm.). Artificial habitats, such as golf courses and playing fields, are more open and thus more suited to Tropical Kingbirds, and probably are less to the liking of Couch's.

The big question relating to Tropical Kingbirds in southern Texas

is: Have they always been resident there, or are they recent newcomers? This confusion arises from the nearly identical appearance of the Couch's Kingbird, which is a common summer and uncommon winter resident in southern Texas, and is compounded by the former conspecific status of Couch's and Tropical under the name Tropical Kingbird. These two taxa were not split until 1983 (AOU 1983), primarily based on the work of Traylor (1979a). Perhaps not coincidentally, it was in the 1980s when the recent Texas reports of Tropical Kingbird began appearing.

In any case, the Tropical Kingbird currently seems to be established as a year-round resident in Cameron County and, perhaps, Hidalgo County. Whether or not this range increases will remain for time to tell.

EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

The status of Tropical Kingbird in eastern North America is almost completely obfuscated by the Tropical-or-Couch's question. There are about 40 eastern Tropical/Couch's records, and many of these sightings were from the era during which these species were considered conspecific. Furthermore, both Tropical and Couch's kingbirds are vagrants in the east and often fail to do us the favor of calling. Of the 17 eastern records that were identified by voice, camera, or shotgun, nine were considered Couch's, seven were reportedly Tropical, and one specimen was identified as both. Hopefully, with time and increased observer awareness, the pattern of these species in eastern North America will become less confused.

The seven birds identified as Tropical Kingbirds are as follows: a specimen collected at Scarborough, Maine, on October 31, 1915 (Norton 1916); a bird seen and heard at Key West, Florida*, winter 1956 to April 15, 1957 (Stevenson and Anderson 1992); a specimen from Grand Isle, Louisiana, collected May 12, 1984 (*AB* 38:923); a bird photographed at the western end of Anticosti Island, Quebec, June 16, 1984, that was identified by measurements from the photo (M. Gosselin, pers. comm.); a calling bird present near Fairfield, North Carolina, from December 29, 1985, to January 3, 1986 (*AB* 40:270-271); a calling bird photographed in New Haven County, Connecticut, November 11-14, 1990 (*AB* 45:77); and a calling bird well-described from Eagle Harbor, Keweenaw County, Michigan, May 23, 1997 (L. Dombroski, pers. comm.).

The origin of eastern Tropical Kingbirds is virtually unknown. The Maine specimen was identified as *T.m. chloronotus* (AOU 1957) which, by the taxonomy of the time, was considered to occur from southern Mexico into northern Colombia (Hellmayr 1927; Miller et al. 1957). The bird was an immature in fresh plumage, thus confirming that it was likely from a northern hemisphere origin. William Glands of the University of Maine was kind enough to re-examine the specimen and confirmed its identity as a Tropical. This bird's subspecific identity, in current terms, remains unknown. The Louisiana specimen was identified as *T.m. satrapa* (S. Cardiff, pers. comm.), the subspecies which occurs in Texas and eastern Mexico.

Of the nine birds identified as Couch's Kingbirds, four were from Florida, one was from Arkansas, three were from Louisiana (including two specimens), and one was from Alabama. The four Florida records* are as follows: one calling bird present at Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge from December 6-23, 1985 (*AB* 40:273), one heard and photographed at St. Mark's Light on September 26-27, 1986 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994); one calling bird present at

*There has not been a consistent approach regarding members of this complex by the committees reviewing Florida's bird records. Though this difficulty is likely to soon be rectified, I am currently following Stevenson and Anderson's (1994) treatment of the topic.

VAGRANT TROPICAL KINGBIRDS

This table includes all records from states and provinces in which the Tropical Kingbird is considered a vagrant. All Tropical/Couch's kingbirds from Pacific Coast states and provinces have been assumed to be Tropicals unless there is specific reasons to believe otherwise. Excepting sightings from Florida and British Columbia, none of the following records has been rejected by state or provincial records committees as either Tropical Kingbird or Tropical/Couch's Kingbird. In Florida, there has not been a consistent approach regarding members of this complex, and I am therefore following Stevenson and Anderson's (1994) treatment of these birds. In British Columbia, only the most recent reports have been reviewed by the provincial committee, and those have been rejected in their entirety if not calling. Consequently, I have included all published sightings from this province.

ALASKA RECORDS

Ketchikan	Oct. 23–24, 1976	D. Gibson, pers comm
Ketchikan	Oct. 9–13, 1992	AB47:135

BRITISH COLUMBIA RECORDS

French's Beach, Vancouver I.	Feb. 1923	Kermode 1928
Victoria, Vancouver I.	Oct. 17–22, 1972	Roberson 1980
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Oct. 11, 1976	Roberson 1980
Sea Island	Oct. 20–23, 1976	Roberson 1980
Colwood, Vancouver I.	Oct. 26–30, 1977	Roberson 1980
Metchosin, Vancouver I.	Oct. 22–23, 1978	AB 33:208
Colwood, Vancouver I.	Nov. 14–23, 1982	AB 37:217
Tofino/Ucluellet, Vancouver I. (3 birds)	Oct. 22–30, 1985	AB 40:323
Nanaimo, Vancouver I.	Oct. 24, 1986	Campbell et al. 1997
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Nov. 5, 1987	Campbell 1988
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Oct. 3–Nov. 1, 1989	AB 44:148
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Oct. 24–Nov. 8, 1990	Campbell et al. 1997
Delta	Oct. 28–Nov. 1, 1990	AB 45:144
Jordan River, Vancouver I.	Nov. 2, 1990	Campbell et al. 1997
Iona Island	Sept. 26, 1992	AB 47:138
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Oct. 10–21, 1992	Campbell et al. 1997
Central Saanich, Vancouver I.	Oct. 27, 1992	AB 47:138
Central Saanich, Vancouver I.	Nov. 4–8, 1992	AB 47:138
Esquimalt Lagoon, Vancouver I.	Nov. 10–12, 1994	NASFN 49:91
Courtmay, Vancouver I.	Oct. 15–18, 1995	NASFN 50:103
Tofino, Vancouver I.	Oct. 28, 1995	NASFN 50:103
Near Sooke, Vancouver I.	Oct. 20–25, 1996	NASFN 51:107
Jordan River, Vancouver I.	Oct. 22–30, 1996	NASFN 51:107

WASHINGTON RECORDS

Destruction Island, Clallam Co.	Nov. 18, 1916	Slipp 1942
Westport, Grays Harbor Co.	Nov. 26, 1927	Slipp 1942
Hoquiam, Grays Harbor Co.	Nov. 17, 1953	WBRC
Ocean Shores, Grays Harbor Co.	Nov. 6–16, 1976	WBRC
Tokeland, Pacific Co.	Oct. 1, 1984	WBRC
Aberdeen, Grays Harbor Co.	Oct. 4, 1984	WBRC
Port Angeles, Clallam Co.	Oct. 6, 1984	WBRC
Tokeland, Pacific Co.	Nov. 16, 1986	AB 41:135
La Push, Clallam Co.	Oct. 10, 1987	AB 42:125
Ocosta, Grays Harbor Co.	Oct. 21–26, 1991	WBRC
Ruby Beach, Clallam Co.	Oct. 30, 1992	AB 47:142
Samish Flats, Skagit Co.	Nov. 15–28, 1992	AB 47:142
Ocean Shores, Grays Harbor Co.	Oct. 16, 1995	NASFN 50:108
Ocean Shores, Grays Harbor Co.	Nov. 2, 1995	WBRC
Port Townsend, Jefferson Co.	Nov. 2, 1996	NASFN 51:112

OREGON RECORDS

Tillamook, Tillamook Co.	Nov. 14, 1965	AFN 20:85
Taft, Lincoln Co.	Oct. 13, 1973	AB 28:97
Devil's Elbow St. Pk., Lane Co.	Nov. 3, 1973	AB 28:97
Harris Beach, Curry Co.	Oct. 9–10, 1976	AB 31:215
Bandon, Coos Co.	Oct. 27, 1979	AB 34:193
Yaquina Bay, Lincoln Co.	Oct. 14, 1981	AB 36:211
Garibaldi, Tillamook Co.	Oct. 17, 1981	AB 36:211
Langlois, Curry Co.	Oct. 22, 1981	AB 36:211

AB = *American Birds*, AFN = *Audubon Field Notes*, NASFN = *National Audubon Society Field Notes*, WBRC = from the files of the Washington Bird Records Committee

Belle Glade from February 2 to April 7, 1991 (AB 45:266, AB 45:437), and one heard and seen near Loxahatchee N.W.R. from December 18, 1993, to March 28, 1994 (*Florida Field Naturalist* 22:123) The non-Florida records are as follows: one photographed and taped at Lake Millwood, Arkansas, on December 5, 1995 (NASFN 50 181), one collected in Cameron Parish, Louisiana, on October 9, 1965 (S Cardiff, pers. comm.); one seen, then collected, in Cameron Parish, Louisiana, on December 20–21, 1986 (S. Cardiff, pers. comm.), one seen in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, on February 10–11, 1991 (AB 45:285); and one heard at Fort Morgan, Alabama, on October 4, 1988 (AB 43:119).

The controversial specimen resulted from a bird photographed and then collected about 25 miles west of Boca Raton, Florida, February 1 to March 2, 1996 (NASFN 50:163). It was initially considered a Couch's by several well-respected ornithologists at Louisiana State University who were using Traylor's (1979a) criteria. The specimen was recently reviewed by Traylor himself, who felt that it was a Tropical with an aberrant wing chord (S. Cardiff, pers. comm.)

The remaining unidentified Tropical/Couch's Kingbirds include five from Louisiana, one from Alabama, about 18 from Florida, one from Maine, and one from Nova Scotia. All have been between September 7 and May 20, excepting the Nova Scotia record, which was from July 18 (Tufts 1986).

SUMMARY

North of the Mexican border, the Tropical Kingbird is a very local nester but a far-flung wanderer. Nesting takes place at scattered locations in southeastern Arizona and, recently, at a few locations in southernmost Texas. Come fall, the Arizona birds leave, presumably migrating south, while the Texas birds stay put. At the same time, there is a push of Tropical Kingbirds northward along the Pacific Coast consisting of mostly immature birds that were likely reared in northwestern Mexico. This movement results in about 40 sightings per year, mostly in southern and central California, and mostly from mid-September through mid-November. The great majority of these vagabonds simply seem to disappear, but during most years a couple do survive through the winter in southern California. Otherwise, wintering Tropicals are normally found only in the small, resident, and recently established South Texas population. Come spring, Tropicals return to their breeding sites in southeastern Arizona, usually by mid-May. The one or two wintering in southern California have usually departed by mid-April, and the Texas birds remain on territory.

Outside of the above "typical" pattern, there are some extraordinary records. Two Tropical Kingbirds have ventured as far north as Ketchikan, Alaska, on the Pacific Coast, and one made it to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon, in the Western Interior. To the east, Tropicals have wandered at least as far as Scarborough, Maine, Anticosti Island, Quebec; and Keweenaw County, Michigan. The origin of vagrant birds away from the Pacific Coast is uncertain. Some of these may be mirror-image migrants, as the west coast birds are Others may be spring "overshoots" that have overflowed their breeding grounds, and yet others could be from the migratory South American population, arriving here in much the same manner as the Fork-tailed Flycatcher.

In the future, greater efforts at separating Tropical Kingbirds from Couch's, combined with study of specimens, will further clarify the pattern and source of Tropical Kingbird vagrancy in North America north of Mexico.

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VAGRANT TROPICAL KINGBIRDS (continued)

OREGON RECORDS (cont.)		
Yaquina Bay, Lincoln Co.	Nov. 3-15, 1982	AB37:217
Coos Bay, Coos Co.	Nov. 4, 1982	OBRC
Sunset Bay St. Pk., Coos Co.	Oct. 20, 1983	OBRC
Winchester Bay, Douglas Co.	Oct. 23, 1983	AB38:239
Yaquina Bay, Lincoln Co.	Sept. 30, 1984	OBRC
Cape Arago, Coos Co.	Feb. 18, 1985	Oregon B 11:105
Yaquina Bay, Lincoln Co.	Oct. 19, 1986	AB41:135
Nehalem Meadows, Tillamook Co.	Nov. 4-11, 1986	AB41:135
Nehalem Meadows, Tillamook Co.	Nov. 4-15, 1986	AB41:135
Yaquina Bay, Lincoln Co.	Oct. 24, 1990	AB45:34
Hammond, Clatsop Co.	Nov. 17, 1991	AB46:308
Newport, Lincoln Co.	Nov. 7, 1993	AB48:146
Cape Blanco, Curry Co.	Nov. 16, 1993	AB48:146
Astoria, Clatsop Co.	Nov. 1, 1994	NASFN 49:94
Malheur NWR, Harney Co.	Sept. 27, 1995	NASFN 50:108
Cape Blanco, Curry Co.	Oct. 5, 1995	NASFN 50:108
Florence, Lane Co.	Nov. 18-24, 1995	NASFN 50:108
S. Jetty Columbia River, Clatsop Co.	Nov. 27, 1995	NASFN 50:108
Sauvie Island, Multnomah Co.	Nov. 1-17, 1996	NASFN 51:112
Brookings, Curry Co.	Oct. 17, 1996	OBRC
NEVADA AND NEW MEXICO RECORDS *		
Near Davis Dam, Clark Co., NV	Late May 1980	Rosenberg et al. 1991
Rodeo, Hidalgo Co., NM (photo)	Dec. 14-21, 1980	Monson & Phillips 1981
Pahrnagat NWR, Lincoln Co., NV	Nov. 7, 1982	M. Cressman, pers comm
* These birds were not heard and probably should be considered Tropical / Couch's Kingbirds.		
EASTERN NORTH AMERICAN RECORDS		
Scarborough, Cumberland Co. ME	Oct. 31, 1915	Norton 1916
Key West, Monroe Co., FL	Winter 1956-1957	Stevenson & Anderson 1992
Grand Isle, La Fourche Parish, LA	May 12, 1984	AB 38:923
Anticosti Island, PQ	June 16, 1984	M Gosselin, pers comm
Near Fairfield, NC †	Dec. 29, 1985-Jan. 3, 1986	AB40:270-1
New Haven Co., CT	Nov. 11-14, 1990	AB45:77
Eagle Harbor, Keweenaw Co., MI	May 23, 1997	L. Dombroski, pers. comm.
† This kingbird from North Carolina was identified as a Tropical, by voice, by several experienced observers. Owing to the lack of a tape recording, however, the state committee chose to accept it only as a Tropical/Couch's (H. LeGrand, pers comm).		
AB = American Birds, AFN = Audubon Field Notes, NASFN = National Audubon Society Field Notes, OBRC = from the files of the Oregon Bird Records Committee, WBRC = from the files of the Washington Bird Records Committee		

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