

IDENTIFICATION QUIZ



The key to making a correct identification of this bird is to pay close attention to its *environment* as well as its *appearance*. At first glance it appears we have little to go on. However, if we focus our attention on the bird's face, we note a broad, flat bill; large, dark eyes; faint, light eyerings; and pale lores. These features can belong to only a few North American birds, specifically *Empidonax* flycatchers and female or immature male American Redstarts (*Setophaga ruticilla*). A redstart would not show pale edges to the tertials or a long tail no darker than the back. At this point, some of us might think of vireos, e.g., Hutton's (*Vireo huttoni*) or Solitary (*V. solitarius*), but these have narrower bills and

build pendant nests suspended by the rim from the arms of a forked branch. The bird, what can be seen of it, has the overall look of an *Empidonax* sp., which in fact it is.

Now most *Empidonax* flycatchers are difficult to identify even when the entire bird is in view. What makes us think this bird can be identified to species? Here's where a shift in focus, from bird to environment, is in order. The bird is obviously on a nest, and *Empidonax* spp. are quite distinctive in their nesting habits (consider the choices confined to those species nesting in western North America). There are really *two* taxonomic identifications to be made in this photo: the bird and the shrub in which it is nesting. Careful examination of the leaves around the nest reveals the characteristic size and shape of leaves of many species of manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), the preeminent plants of western montane chaparral. The characteristic *Empidonax* of this habitat is the Dusky Flycatcher (*E. oberholseri*), which often nests in manzanita bushes.

Is there any reason to suspect another species? Gray (*E. wrightii*) and Hammond's (*E. hammondi*) flycatchers are the only other reasonable candidates, but neither fits the picture. Gray Flycatcher should show a bright pale base to the lower mandible and usually builds a less-tidy nest in Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) or other plants of the Great Basin deserts. A Hammond's Flycatcher would show a shorter tail and longer wings, and would usually build its nest on a high, horizontal branch of a conifer. All aspects of this bird's appearance and nest environment best fit Dusky Flycatcher — the correct conclusion.

The bird was photographed in August 1974 at Castle Crags State Park, Siskiyou County, California, by Bruce Webb.

TIM MANOLIS, 3532 Winston Way, Carmichael, California 95608



Dusky Flycatcher

Sketch by Keith Hansen