

ON THE ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax trailli alnorum*)

BY P. B. PEABODY

The paper by Mr. S. E. Perkins III in a recent issue of the WILSON BULLETIN (XXXVIII, March, 1926, pp. 43-44), has proved, with me, of peculiar interest. In widely sundered regions have I studied both the Traill-Alder and the Acadian Flycatchers with rare delight. If I presume to question Mr. Perkins' identification, it is because the details so carefully and accurately given present a rather decided mal-diagnosis. The main associational condition is widely remote from any elsewhere imputed to the Acadian Flycatcher. This species is, pre-eminently, a bird of the uplands; while the lowland associations are, in the main, persistently sought by Alder and Traill's Flycatchers. In Kansas, however, with Traill's Flycatcher (habitation proven by P. B. P., auct., H. C. Oberhoser) the reverse seems mainly true, the nestings being in osage hedges. But I have never heard before of a lowland nesting imputed to *Empidonax virescens*, of whose nest Coues (Key to N. A. Birds, 5th ed.) has said: ". . . in trees, low or at no great elevation, semi-pensile in horizontal fork of a slender bough. . . ." (P. 528). Of *alnorum* the same author has written thus: ". . . especially common in low wet places along the alders, willows . . . in which its nest is placed, as a rule in an upright crotch of two or more twigs." (P. 529). As to the nests of these greatly differing species, Coues also says (op. cit.): Of the Acadian, ". . . thin and open-worked shallow, flat, saucer-shaped. . . ." (P. 528). *Per contra*, of *alnorum*, ". . . thick-walled, deeply cupped, more or less compact, sometimes quite slovenly, like an Indigo-bird's, and in any case quite different from the frail flat saucer of *virescens*." (P. 529). As to this fundamental difference in the nest-structure of these two contrastive flycatchers, it may be apropos to state that, in Kansas, as also in California, the nests of the Traill's Flycatcher are distinctly more thick-walled, more heavily and softly felted, than the nests of the Alder Flycatchers of Wisconsin and Minnesota. This difference I find to be apparently fixed; and it is well to bear this in mind. But far more diagnostic, perhaps, than either environ or structure of nest are the "manners" and the call-notes and songs of these flycatchers. In my thirty years of migration-reporting for the Biological Survey I have learned to place far greater stress upon *audience* than upon *vision* in making positive differentiations. And it is just here that I, the more confidently, believe Mr. Perkins to have been mistaken in his identification.

The Acadian Flycatcher is, pre-eminently, a vivacious, noisy bird; the Traills' Alder Flycatchers are quite the reverse. And these two are, moreover, decidedly shy and retiring. It therefore seems to me to be highly significant that Mr. Perkins' bird ". . . did not sing; it only fussed." This is the more emphatic because of the fact that if ever a bird either *sings* or *calls*, it is when near the nest, under human espionage. As to sizes, measurements, and colorations, Mr. Perkins has, unfortunately left much to be guessed at. He does not, for instance, tell us what the dorsal contour plumage of his birds was found to be. Coues has characterized the relative colors, for these two species, thus: the Acadian, "olive-green," as italicized; and the Alder, "olive-brown" (Ref., as above). As for lengths of the birds, and relative lengths of remigial feathers, the differences are so slight that even a keenly critical bird-bander might slip in making the due measurements from the living bird. A maximal and minimal margin of .25 inch quite justifies, does it not? the above *dictum*. Let us hope that if Mr. Perkins should succeed in trapping, another season, as he has recently done, and is likely to do, this same pair of flycatchers, he will be sure to give us the dorsal coloration. This will be diagnostic. And if he will also transcribe for us the call-note of his birds, which he surely *may*, the matter will thus have become happily settled. Nor, if his birds prove to be "olive-green" will that fact invalidate my contentions; but only give us a new psychological and habitual complex for his interesting birds. And this will broaden our accuracies of observation and our certainties of knowledge, which is, of course, exactly what we are seeking.

I have never met the Acadian Flycatcher personally, and so am quite ignorant of its song; though all of its *nests* that I have seen conform to the Couesian citations. But I am critically familiar with both the call-notes and the songs of the Alder Flycatcher; though less so with these utterances in case of the Traill's Flycatcher as I have observed it in Kansas.

I have just found, in a Field Book imperfectly indexed, the following valuable note, which I quote as it stands:

Blue Rapids, Kansas, June 10, 1908. Traill's Flycatcher: Flies and perches like *Contopus*. Rather silent. Call, "bit"; song, "viz-you": somewhat like *alnorum*; a few colloquial notes like *borealis*. A pair located for nesting in (an osage) hedge. Perhaps, three pairs in the same eighty-rod hedge. Very silent. One song is "R-r-r-ish-beel," with the (initial) R intensely rolled. But the song is feeble. It resembles the "Shay-deel" of *alnorum*, though more deliberate; and is

like the "Vee-bleer" of *borealis*, though of course, far less resonant. No signs of nesting up to July seventh. Two males taken that day were at sex-maximum—were not fat. No signs of nesting, or of incubation, anywhere. Birds very local. No signs of nesting observed, later.

How happily true it is that "*Litera scripta manet.*"

A brief survey of a fairly ecstatic experience of mine with the Alder Flycatcher, last June (1926), in the Devil's Lake Region of North Dakota, will clinch my contentions, most likely; and cannot but prove edifying to the readers of the WILSON BULLETIN.

Of course, I have long been familiar with the inspiriting morning-song of the Alder Flycatcher, "Zhay-deel," as heard in the northland; as, also, with the soft, subdued, measured "Pip" which this species incessantly iterates, amid its brushland seclusions. This call, though so soft and so liable to be unheard, was so persistent as heard, the past summer, at a Wisconsin brushland nest in a black-oak sprout, at seven feet—a nest that was marvellously sprawly without, yet wondrously neat within—that I always knew, while reconnoitering in the interests of my Cedar Waxwing colony, just when I might be approaching this nest with its three younglings; from whatsoever direction and at howsoever inappreciable a distance. This note is just "Pip," never "Tip"; and there is positively no other species that has a call quite like it. My acquaintance with the Alder Flycatchers of Benson County, North Dakota, in the opening days of June, 1926, had its staging in a little willow "motte," a sort of "island," in the "Big Coulee," an ancient river-bed of the long, meandering Cheyenne Basin. Here, while resting from my strenuous searches of the boggy depths for nests of the Yellow Rail, I found the Alder Flycatcher enacting what was, for me, an entirely new *role*: While this species is the most solitary of all the flycatchers of the mid-north, without exception, I was surprised to find assembled, in that narrow motte, perhaps three pairs, or more. (There was no spot just like it, anywhere in all that region). It was the nuptial time, of course; and the flycatchers were quite definitely localized. By crouching low and keeping utterly still, I had the joy of an association with this seclusive bird never paralleled, before, in fifty years. I even watched the males chase one another, discreetly, guardedly, as if in constant fear of self-betrayal. And I found myself watching their sundry movements as I had never been able to do before. But my most delightful "find" was in the vocal realm. I have rather doubted if any one else has ever heard, before, what I heard that day. It was a decidedly husky, rather feeble note, somewhat akin to the ridiculous nuptial note, bronchitic and gassy, of the Nelson's Spar-

row, as heard in the adjacent meadows. The call may be very accurately expressed in a human vocable; (which, by the way, is not often possible with paraphrases of bird-calls and bird-songs). Here, then, you have it: "Wish-beer." This odd call I heard, over and over again; sometimes, at ten-foot distances. I never heard a more characteristic bird sound, nor one which, for all its ridiculous feebleness, yet rests so strongly and so powerfully upon my memory. Shall I ever hear it again, I wonder? Truly, I *may* hope to enjoy that out-sounding "Zhay-deel," again, next summer, at the dear old Wisconsin home. But, "Wish-beer"! Anyhow, here's hoping, and *hoping*, that Mr. Perkins and his confreres may hear it, along their tiny cat-tail-willow Indiana swale, the twentieth of next May!

TOPEKA, KANSAS.

SUMMER BIRDS IN THE VICINITY OF PLUM LAKE, VILAS COUNTY, WISCONSIN*

BY ALVIN R. CAHN, PH. D.

When, on June 26, 1925, Governor Blaine of Wisconsin, signed Assembly Bill No. 351, there came into existence the largest public park in the northern part of Wisconsin, and one of the finest preserves in the middle west. The Northern Forest Park, as this new preserve and game refuge is called, comprises an area of some 92,000 acres of forests, swamps and lakes, approximately 76,000 acres of which are state owned. Upon these state owned lands henceforth there will be no hunting and no trapping, and the wild life which still clings desperately and almost miraculously to these northern Wisconsin forests will have its chance to recuperate from the slaughter to which it has been subjected in the past. In this area the generations that are to come will find, we hope, such wild life as we ourselves have enjoyed—perhaps even more. If those who privately own the land within the boundaries of the new park will co-operate with the state in carrying out the spirit as well as the letter of the law by posting their lands against hunters and trappers, we may rest assured that here the generations of tomorrow will find an abundance of wild life.

The new Northern Forest preserve lies in the very heart of the "land-o'-lakes" region of Vilas County, Wisconsin. It includes fine forest areas of large second growth timber, with scattered areas of virgin white pine not unknown. Luxurious undergrowth, untouched by fire for many years, covers the country and offers shelter and breeding

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