

WINTERING EASTERN PHOEBES (*SAYORNIS PHOEBE*), *EMPIDONAX* FLYCATCHERS AND ASEASONAL RECORDS OF KINGBIRDS IN THE BAHAMA ISLANDS

DAVID S. LEE¹, CRAIG FAANES², AND J. CHRISTOPHER HANEY³

¹North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, P. O. Box 29555, Raleigh, North Carolina 27626, USA; ²U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Rm. 400, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Arlington, Virginia 22203, USA; ³The Wilderness Society, 900 Seventeenth Street, N. W., Washington, DC 20006-2596, USA.

The Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) is a short-distance migrant with a winter range that is essentially confined to the southeastern United States (Bent 1942). Eastern Phoebes winter only in areas where the mean minimum January temperature is above -4°C (25°F) (Root 1988). The primary winter range is in Atlantic and Gulf coastal states from Virginia to Texas, and northern Mexico where the southern- and western-most records are from Oaxaca and Veracruz (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Based on Christmas Bird Count data, areas of peak winter abundance are in eastern Texas and north-central Florida (September to May). This flycatcher is a rare and irregular winter resident in the Keys and extreme southern Florida (Root 1988, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Individuals establish winter feeding territories and defend them both intra- and inter-specifically.

Despite their winter abundance in coastal areas of the southeastern United States and a modest number of reports from Bermuda (Amos 1991), there are surprisingly few reports of Eastern Phoebes from the West Indies (Table 1). Bent (1942) and Barbour (1943) noted one from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The immature specimen was collected by Juan Gundlach in February 1846. It was such an unusual record that Gundlach, not familiar with the bird, named it as a new species — *Aulanax lembeyei*. Bond (1985) and Brudenell-Bruce (1975) cite two reports from the Bahamas—Bimini, 18 November; Grand Bahama, 10 October. Bond noted the period of occurrence for this species in the West Indies as 11 September–18 November. The only additional report of which we are aware is a single bird seen on Eleuthera, Bahamas on 7 February 1986 (*American Birds* 40:529). This was the only report for the Bahamas or West Indies since 1972.

Because of the small number of records for the West Indies, two sightings of Eastern Phoebe we obtained on Grand Bahama in November 1995 are of interest. On 25 November we found a single bird feeding over a small freshwater pond on the property of the Rand Nature Center (Bahamas National Trust), and on 26 November we encountered a second individual perched next to another small freshwater pond at West End. Both birds were watched intermittently for half an hour or more. Tail-wagging and other field marks were confirmed as the birds perched and foraged over the corners of the ponds they occupied. Rick and Kathy Oliver (Rand Nature Center) informed us that at least one of these was still present in mid-February 1996.

Although these records undoubtedly reflect as much the

lack of previous field work and reporting as they do on the scarcity of Eastern Phoebes in the Bahamas (see discussion below), we should add that this may have been a particularly good winter for short-range migrants reaching the Bahamas. From 24 to 26 November we also recorded 2 American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*), 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*), and 3+ Cedar Waxwings (*Bombocilla cedrorum*) on Grand Bahama. All are considered to be sporadic, irregular visitors to the Bahamas. Whether or not these birds collectively represented vanguards of an unseasonably cold winter in the southeastern United States or vagrants resulting from an earlier aberrant weather system is unknown.

These phoebe reports represent the fourth and fifth for the Bahamas, and the fifth and sixth for the West Indies. Dates of the sightings extend the period of known occurrence in the Bahamas by nearly three months and are outside the normal fall migration period for the species.

We also observed one *Empidonax* flycatcher at West End, Grand Bahama on 26 November 1995, and one of us (Lee) found three on Abaco in early December 1995. These records are at least a month past the fall migration period for any eastern North American *Empidonax*, and like the records of the Eastern Phoebes are here considered as records of wintering individuals. The Grand Bahama *Empidonax* was at the edge of a coastal shrub thicket ca. 100 m from the beach at West End. It was observed for approximately 10 minutes by all of us. Other than an incomplete eye ring, no useful field marks were noted. The Abaco birds were at the edge of a red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) swamp bordering a beach front at Sandy Point (2 and 5 December) and at the airport at Marsh Harbor (6 December). This latter individual was perched on a wire under the eave of the air terminal — a most unexpected site of occurrence. The habitat surrounding the airport is open 30-year-old Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribaea*) forest. No distinct field marks were noted on any of the Abaco birds, and like the individual found on Grand Bahama all were non-vocal. The only previous winter record we know for the Bahamas is of a single unidentified *Empidonax* heard calling from dense vegetation on Eleuthera (Bahamas) on 7 February 1986 (*American Birds* 40:339).

Reported migration periods of *Empidonax* flycatchers for the Bahamas, and elsewhere in the West Indies, are scarce and identification in most cases is problematic. The birds are drab, usually silent, and often provide only fleeting views. Amos (1991), in describing the situation in Bermuda where

Wintering Flycatchers in the Bahamas (Continued)

five species are reported to occur, sums up the problem nicely: "species identifications have been based on careful observation and some inspired conjecture." Furthermore, two *Empidonax* recently (1973) recognized as separate species are distinguished primarily by vocalizations and ecology. They are difficult to separate in migration or on wintering grounds where they are typically silent. Hussell (1990) showed that many immatures of Alder (*Empidonax alnorum*) and Willow (*E. traillii*) flycatchers cannot be separated, and Seutin (1991) recommended caution when attempting to identify these flycatchers with morphometrics.

Collected *Empidonax* specimens and sight records are usually combined in writing species accounts for specific islands, masking accuracy of statements, and making it difficult to decipher what level of confidence can be placed on what has been published. The situation in Bahamas is a good example of the problem. A single migrant collected on New Providence on 14 October 1961 is an Acadian Flycatcher (*E. virescens*). Based on this record this species is the only *Empidonax* mentioned for the Bahamas (Brudenell-Bruce 1975) and the descriptive text only tells how to distinguish the genus *Empidonax* from the Greater Antillean Peewee (*Contopus caribaeus*). Subsequently, the Acadian Flycatcher has since appeared as the only *Empidonax* on a checklist of the birds of the Bahamas (Bahamas National Trust).

On 25 November 1995, we also found a single Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) and one Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*) at West End, Grand Bahama. Both were foraging in a large fig (*Ficus* sp.) tree with ripe fruit. Both are late-season records for the northern Bahamas.

Brudenell-Bruce (1975) reported the latest date in fall for the Gray Kingbird on New Providence as 12 November, but also includes a 12 December report for Great Inagua much farther south. Bond (1985) notes that the Gray Kingbird winters in northern South America but is "chiefly a permanent resident from Hispaniola eastward." Emlen (1977), however, reported Gray Kingbirds for Grand Bahama on 10 January 1968 and 14 March 1969.

The Western Kingbird is a rare passage migrant in the Caribbean, known only in migration from the Bahamas and Swan Islands (Bond 1985). Brudenell-Bruce (1975) recorded it from 15 October to 1 November on New Providence. Western Kingbirds have also been seen on Bimini, Grand Bahama, and Eleuthera. The latest occurrence date reported by Brudenell-Bruce is 26 November (Eleuthera), but there is a report of 3+ Western Kingbirds for Greater Abaco from 24 December 1983 to 2 January 1984 (*American Birds* 38:362), another from Abaco on 16-19 November 1990 (*American Birds* 45:500), and a report from North Andros of one on 10 November 1968 (*American Birds* 23:38).

We suggest that all these species may occur with greater regularity and at dates well outside the extreme periods of occurrence summarized here, and we conclude that further field work will show all of the species discussed here to be

more common, wide-spread, or less seasonally-restricted in the Bahamas and Greater Caribbean Basin than is presently believed. Resolving the identification and status of migrant and wintering *Empidonax* flycatchers will require systematic collections of specimens from several islands, seasons, and habitats, not just in the Bahamas, but throughout the West Indies.

This report results from an agreement among the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, The Bahamas National Trust, The College of the Bahamas, and the Bahamas Department of Agriculture. The focus of this agreement is the development of an understanding and the long-range conservation of nearctic migrants under the umbrella of the International Partners-in-Flight Program. We thank Robert L. Norton, Anthony White, and Catherine Levy for reviewing the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologists' Union. 1983. Checklist of North American Birds, 6th ed. Washington, D.C.: American Ornithologists' Union.
- Amos, E. J. R. 1991. A guide to the birds of Bermuda. Bermuda: Warwick.
- Barbour, T. 1943. Cuban ornithology. Mem. Nuttall Ornithol. Club No. 9:1-144.
- Bent, A. C. 1942. Life histories of North American flycatchers, larks, swallows and their allies. U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 179.
- Bond, J. 1985. Birds of the West Indies (4th Edition). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, Boston.
- Brudenell-Bruce, P. G. C. 1975. The birds of the Bahamas. New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., New York.
- Emlen, J. T. 1977. Land bird communities of Grand Bahama Island: the structure and dynamics of an avifauna. Ornithol. Monogr. No. 24.
- Fitzpatrick, J. W. 1980. Wintering of North American tyrant flycatchers in the neotropics. Pp. 67-78 In Keast, A., and E. S. Morton (eds.), Migrant birds in the neotropics: ecology, behavior, distribution, and conservation. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Hussell, D. J. T. 1990. Implications of age-dependent bill length variation in *Empidonax* for identification of immature Alder and Willow flycatchers. J. Field Ornithol. 61:54-63.
- Root, T. 1988. Atlas of wintering North American birds. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Robertson, W. B., Jr., and G. E. Woolfenden. 1992. Florida bird species an annotated list. Florida Ornithol. Soc. Spec. Publ. No. 6.
- Seutin, G. 1991. Morphometric identification of Traill's Flycatcher: an assessment of Stein's formula. J. Field Ornithol. 62:308-313.
- Stevenson, H. M., and B. H. Anderson. 1994. The birdlife of Florida. Gainesville: Univ. Florida Press.

Table 1. Non-breeding distributions of nearctic migrant tyrant flycatchers known or reported from the Bahama Islands and Caribbean (sources: Amos 1991, Fitzpatrick 1980, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, and sources cited in text).

Species	Winter distribution	Winter records— Caribbean	Migrant records— Caribbean	Remarks
Eastern Phoebe <i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	SE US to S Mexico	Bahamas, Cuba	Bahamas, Cuba	Occurrence in Caribbean 11 Sept. through Feb. Winters in SE US and Bermuda.
Western Kingbird <i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>	S Mexico to Nicaragua	none	Bahamas, Swan Islands	Over 200 reports from Florida (where it has been reported for all months) and winters in Bermuda.
Gray Kingbird <i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>	S West Indies (rare), Panamá, N Colombia, Guyana	S and E from Hispaniola	N/A	Stevenson and Anderson (1994) believed Florida Christmas Bird Count reports were stragglers and not winter residents. Spring and fall migrant in Bermuda.
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher <i>Empidonax flaviventris</i>	NE Mexico to Panamá	none	none	Recorded from Bermuda in winter. Transient only in Florida.
Willow Flycatcher <i>Empidonax traillii</i>	S Mexico to Panamá	none	Cuba, Isle of Pines, Jamaica	Fall transient in Bermuda, rare fall and casual spring migrants in Florida. No winter Florida records.
Alder Flycatcher <i>Empidonax alnorum</i>	NW Colombia to Paraguay and Argentina	none	Cuba, Isle of Pines, Jamaica	Fall transient in Bermuda, rare fall and casual spring migrants in Florida. No winter Florida records.
Acadian Flycatcher <i>Empidonax virescens</i>	Costa Rica to W Colombia and NW Venezuela	none	Bahamas, Cuba, Isle of Pines	Fall transient in Bermuda; transient in peninsular Florida, a few unconfirmed winter reports.
Least Flycatcher <i>Empidonax minimus</i>	N Mexico to W Panamá	Grand Cayman (10 March)	Grand Cayman	Fall transient in Bermuda. A few individuals winter in south Florida.