

WAS IT A GRAY FLYCATCHER???

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Returning home at about 4 p.m. on 27 August 1985, I was aware of much bird sound coming from my back yard. I heard the "static" of what I thought were nuthatches and, curious, I walked into the yard quietly, intent on discovering what was going on. I did indeed see four Red-breasted Nuthatches and spent several minutes watching them feeding in a large apple tree. Following the activity of one particularly noisy bird, I watched it fly to a second tree nearby, where there was another bird, whose presence caused me to forget the nuthatches.

The new bird was an Empidonax, about the size of a Least Flycatcher. It was sitting very still, almost vertically, on a small branch. However, it appeared somewhat slimmer than the usual Least and its tail seemed longer and narrower in proportion to the body. The back was a pale soft gray and the sides grayish but paler than the back. The throat was whitish and the underparts from upper breast to tail seemed tinged with yellow. The wing bars were quite faint. The bird had a definite but not highly contrasting eye-ring.

The feature which most intrigued me, however, was the manner in which the bird was moving its tail. Beginning from a nearly vertical position, the tail moved forward under the body and the branch, almost to the point where I could imagine the bird simply falling over backwards. Then the tail returned to its original position, from which, after a few seconds, it again moved forward. This motion was repeated slowly and regularly; not once did the tail rise back beyond the vertical position. The wings were motionless.

During this time the bird made no sound. It made two or three flycatching

forays out from the branch, returning to sit at approximately the same spot and resuming its tail movement in the same way as before. Then it began flitting from tree to bush to bush to a tree farther away, apparently flycatching en route. The bird moved out of the yard and I was not able to find it again.

I watched this bird for about 5 minutes as it sat on the branch (about 3 cm in diameter) and followed it for approximately another minute as it moved across and out of the yard. Though I had no binoculars at the time, I was less than 5 m from it as it sat, and rarely that far as it moved. Visibility was unimpeded through several leafless areas in the tree; the sun was still quite high and the light good. There was almost no wind. I was sure that the bird was not one of the flycatchers which frequent the area near the South Saskatchewan River where I live.

Various field guides were checked against my observations. An apparently definitive statement in the *Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* states about the Gray Flycatcher: "Its tail movement is unique, consisting of a relatively slow wag downward and back up to the tail's original slant. Other empids jerk or quiver their tails very rapidly, with the initial motion upward (or backward if the tail is held vertically...) The Gray's usually slower tail movement, merely down and back, combined with wings that are usually held still, create a relatively placid appearance."¹ The description matches quite closely all the details which I had noted in observing the bird in my apple tree a short time earlier. Unfortunately, I did not note the colour of the lower mandible and therefore could not use this as an identifying mark. Robbins et al.

also state that this species is the "only Empidonax to pump tail *down* first."²

This bird may have been a Gray Flycatcher. I could and did see it well. I am equally sure that it had not stowed away in my van, in which, coincidentally, I had just spent some 3 weeks in the mountains and Great Basin of Wyoming and Colorado, much more "home" to Gray Flycatchers than Saskatchewan — where

there is no previous record of their occurrence. However, for the moment, this is "the bird that got away."

¹ BAILEY, S.F. 1983 Gray Flycatcher. P. 266
In FARRAND, JOHN JR. 1983 Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding V. 2. Knopf, New York

² ROBBINS, C.S., B. BRUNN and H.S. ZIM 1983 A guide to field identification — birds of North America. Golden Press, New York

A FURTHER REPORT ON GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHERS

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For the past five summers a pair of Great Crested Flycatchers has occupied a nest box set up in the wooded area of our summer property at Whytewold on Lake Winnipeg. Apart from the fact that it was enjoyable to have had this particular species close at hand, the main purpose of the research was to make observations, and above all, to ascertain if any different materials had been used for nest building.

The first three years, 1981-83, have already been reported upon.¹ Further details presented here are for 1984-85.

At the end of May, 1984, the birds appeared as usual and occupied the nest box. Nesting was completed on 17 July; early that morning three fledglings were perched on bare branches near the nest box. There were a great many calls from the young and, on one occasion, a loud whistle came from the male to give warning of two Grey Squirrels which were climbing up and down the nearby trees. At 1900 h there was a great deal of commotion. The male was darting around the treetops at the front of our property and, after a few moments, *six* fledglings were located, perched on an oak branch 9 m

from the ground and about 19 m from the nest site.

After an absence of 12 days, during which calls were heard occasionally from a wooded area about 60 m distant, the entire family returned to the yard. On 31 July, 14 days after fledging, one young was observed being fed.

On 5 July 1984 I located another nest site about 0.4 km away. Both male and female were feeding young in a cavity of a hollowed-out log attached to an oak tree, approximately 3.6 m from the ground. Although it was only 3 m from a cottage sundeck, and Great Cresteds are usually cautious, secretive birds of the woods, the nest had been built before the owners had opened their cottage. There were many trees on this property.

The birds had a very narrow nesting space; the log was about 32.5 cm long, and 12.5 cm wide, with a crack down the centre nearly 1.25 cm wide. The entrance hole was 7.5 cm diameter and 6.25 cm from the top.

On 9 July three young were seen when the adults came with insects; 14 July calls