

Photo Quiz

Bob Curry



By its gestalt, most readers of this column will have instantly recognized the small passerine as a flycatcher in the family Tyrannidae. Nevertheless, it is worth analyzing the features which resulted in this impression. The small size can be determined by comparing the bird to the branches of various sizes. It has two prominent wingbars, light-edged secondaries and tertiaries, and a fairly long tail. The erect posture on the branch is characteristic of flycatchers. But the bill clinches it; it is rather long and pointed, with a definite hook on the tip of the upper mandible. Finally, the rictal bristles or whiskers, diagnostic of flycatchers among the passerines,

can be seen on close examination.

The next task, in this analytic rather than holistic task, is to determine which genus of flycatcher is involved. In point of fact, the small size combined with the prominent wingbars eliminates most other candidate genera. The *Tyrannus* group of kingbirds and their allies can be eliminated by their much larger size, big heads, large stout bills, bold patterns, and wingbars which are weak or nonexistent. The *Sayornis* or phoebes are plain and big-headed, with essentially no eyerings and very weak wingbars. *Myiarchus* flycatchers are larger and longer, with long stout bills and rather prominent crests. So our bird

comes down to the two very difficult genera: the *Contopus* or woodpeewees or the dreaded *Empidonax* flycatchers.

Let's look more closely at the basic features of this bird, working from head to tail. The bill in profile is fairly long (at least as long as the distance from bill base to the front of the eye). Moreover, it is quite deep at the base, giving it a triangular profile. The eyering is complete, sharp-edged and fine, and of uniform thickness. The top edge of the eyering appears to be duller or almost interrupted, but this is caused by some overlapping crown feathers. The wingbars formed by light tips to each greater and median upper wing covert are whitish and very prominent. The tail is quite long, being about the same length as the body from crown to rump. Moreover, it is rather broad throughout its length. The wings are very long, the tips of the primaries extending two-thirds of the way down the tail, and the primary extension beyond the secondaries is very long.

The eyering, boldness of wingbars and chunky shape eliminate the woodpeewees, which have no eyering and rather dull wingbars. So, now that we have identified the bird as an *Empidonax*, the features just noted help us to narrow the field even more. Least, Yellow-bellied and the Pacific-slope-Cordilleran (Western) complex all have smaller bills, tear-shaped eyerings and short primary extensions. Dusky and Hammond's Flycatchers appear to

be rather big-headed, short-tailed birds with rather short and narrow bills. The bill of Gray Flycatcher may approach this bird in length, but it is narrower throughout and the lower mandible is sharply bicoloured, with an extensive dark tip. Furthermore, Gray Flycatcher has noticeably shorter primaries than the subject bird.

So identification falls to the terrible trio of Willow, Alder and Acadian. In the absence of voice, which would be diagnostically different, and colour, which would be of some help, we are left with structure and proportions. For the remainder of this analysis, and where it makes economic sense, the Alder-Willow species pair will be called Traill's. In both Traill's and Acadian, the bill is long and deep. From underneath, if we could see it, Acadian has an even longer, broader bill than the others, but an overzealous observer can easily be convinced that any Traill's has a bill sufficiently large for Acadian. The eyering is rather more complete and especially neat for it to be Traill's, but again this is a tendency only and many birds may prove exceptions to these points. Willow most frequently has a very incomplete eyering or essentially none at all. Alder can have a complete eyering, but again it would not tend to be so fine and symmetrical. In this black and white reproduction, the shade from crown to rump is the same. In Alder, there is a tendency for more contrast between darker head and a slightly lighter back.

Identification, in this case with the many limitations of the black and white reproduction, falls then to the bird's proportions. Acadian Flycatcher has the longest primary projection, and this **Acadian Flycatcher** has extremely long outer primaries. In fact, they are so long that the pose shown here, with wings drooped down the sides of the tail rather than folded over the rectrices, is typical and highly suggestive of the species. The tail itself is rather more broad than any of the other candidates.

Empidonax flycatchers as a group are exceptions to the principle that first impressions are usual-

ly correct where bird identification is concerned. First impression (and enthusiasm) may suggest one species, but careful dissection of all the critical features is necessary to begin to put a name to these difficult birds. Never be embarrassed to say that you are not sure which of a pair or subgroup of species is the correct identification for any individual bird. Extreme caution must be observed in the identification of non-vocalizing Acadian, Willow, and Alder Flycatchers.

This Acadian Flycatcher was photographed by Michael Runtz at Point Pelee National Park.

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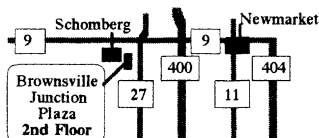
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