

Great Kiskadee at Rondeau Provincial Park.
18 October 2018. Photo: P. Allen Woodliff

The discovery of a Great Kiskadee at Rondeau Provincial Park: New to Ontario and Canada

Laura Rainbow Dragon



ON THE MORNING OF 7 SEPTEMBER 2018, I was hiking the Marsh Trail in Rondeau Provincial Park when I spotted a bird I did not recognize perched on a branch of a fallen tree. This was not a surprise to me. I had been bitten by the birding bug through my visits to Rondeau Park in the spring of that same year and by September had learned enough to know that Rondeau was visited by over 300 species of birds each year, most of which I, as yet, did not know how to identify. As far as I knew, a bird with a bright yellow belly, rusty brown back, and black-and-white striped head was a regular visitor to Rondeau that I had simply not encountered before. I took a few photographs of the bird and then I walked over to join a couple of cyclists on the trail who had stopped to observe the same bird.

I asked the cyclists if they knew what kind of bird it was we were observing. One of them did not. The other thought the bird might be a Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*). Having never before seen a Yellow-breasted Chat, I did not know he was mistaken. After a couple of minutes, the bird we had been observing flew off. The cyclists and I wished each other well and I resumed my hike.

When I returned home from my hike, I looked up the Yellow-breasted Chat in my *Birds of Ontario Lone Pine Field Guide* (Bezener 2000). Immediately I realized that was not the bird I had seen in Rondeau that morning. I rifled through the field guide in search of a more likely suspect, but nothing seemed to fit the bill. So I uploaded my photographs of the bird to iNaturalist.

The image recognition software of iNaturalist suggested that my bird was a Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) (Figure 1). Having never heard of a Great Kiskadee before, I clicked on the link to the bird's species account page to read a bit about what I had seen. The description given of the bird and photographs from other observers fit with what I had seen, but the distribution was wrong. Both the iNaturalist range map and the Wikipedia account of the Great Kiskadee described the bird's range as South and Central America, Mexico and the southern-most tip of Texas. The Great Kiskadee was not an Ontario bird. That could not have been what I had seen.

So I checked the secondary species suggestions given by iNaturalist, such as Lesser Kiskadee (*Pitangus lektor*), Boat-billed Flycatcher (*Megarynchus pitangua*) and Social Flycatcher (*Myiozetetes similis*). While the Boat-billed Flycatcher's bill



Figure 1. Photo of Great Kiskadee uploaded to iNaturalist, 7 September 2018.

Photo: Laura Rainbow Dragon

looked obviously wrong, it and a few of the other alternative suggestions did have the right colour pattern for my bird. But their distributions were all even further south than that of the Great Kiskadee.

I was stumped. I eventually decided to simply identify my observation as a "Tyrant Flycatcher" and left it at that. I fully expected that, within a few hours, a more experienced birder than myself would see my observation and immediately recognize it as one of the Rondeau peninsula's common fall visitors. As it turned out, I was half right.

When I checked my iNaturalist account again a few hours later, to see if my mystery bird had been identified, I was very surprised by the level of interest my observation had generated and also surprised that the more experienced birders who had reviewed my submission agreed with the image recognition software's analysis. I had apparently truly seen a Great Kiskadee that morning—a bird never before recorded in Canada (Burrell *et al.* 2019).

After seeing my report on iNaturalist, a few other local birders headed out to Rondeau Park on the afternoon of 7 September and succeeded in finding the Great Kiskadee within a couple hundred metres of my original sighting. The following day, well over a hundred birders made the trek to Rondeau Park and again, most were rewarded with a sighting of this Canadian first (Figures 2 and 3).

Facing page: Figure 2. Great Kiskadee at Rondeau, 3 November 2018.

Figure 3. Kiskadee pond, 4 November 2018.

Photos: P. Allen Woodliffe



Over the course of the next three months, the Great Kiskadee was observed in Rondeau Park by many birders. Records for this bird were submitted to eBird daily from 7-16 September, after which time the bird disappeared for a few weeks, only to reappear again on 18 October and eBird data show the bird was seen and/or heard daily from 18-31 October and most days from 2-9 November. Rondeau's Great Kiskadee disappeared again at this time, but was observed again in December and again seen or heard daily from 2-10 December. Though local birders continued to search daily for the next week, hoping to score the Great Kiskadee as a new species for the Rondeau/Blenheim Christmas Bird Count on 16 December, the bird was never seen or heard again after 10 December 2018 (eBird 2020).



Great Kiskadee at Rondeau
11 September 2018
Photo: P. Allen Woodliffe

Extralimital records of the Great Kiskadee

P. Allen Woodliffe

THE GREAT KISKADEE, known as the Derby Flycatcher at the time, was first recorded north of Mexico in 1879 when two were shot near Lake San Jose along the lower Rio Grande in southern Texas (Bent 1942). It was recorded on rare occasions for several decades after that, but only in extreme southern Texas. While it was thought in the late 1800s and early 1900s that the species would not do well in Texas due to the ongoing changes in natural habitat (Bent 1942), it showed remarkable adaptation to such changes. It has never been considered much of a

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Laura Rainbow Dragon
E-mail: laura@rainbowdragon.ca

migrant especially compared with many other flycatcher species, remaining largely in its normal range most of the time. Yet it has expanded that range quite a bit.

In recent years, in North America north of Mexico, it is most often seen south of the general Houston to San Antonio latitude (29° 30' N); north of there, the records diminish considerably (eBird 2020). Nonetheless, there have been scattered observations from as far west as southern Arizona to as far east as South Carolina and to as far north as South Dakota.

Spring records of Great Kiskadee well beyond the species normal range in places like Colorado, Tennessee and Arkansas, are single day records only. However, when a Great Kiskadee shows up well beyond its normal range in late summer or early winter, it may linger for quite a while (eBird 2020). For example, while there are only three records for Arizona, one of them included a bird staying at Canoa, a short distance south of Tucson, from 27 December 1979 to 6 May 1980 (Tucson Audubon Society 2011). Another bird was present in Kansas from 15 September to 10 November 2013. One that showed up in South Carolina in February 2017 was observed until April 2018. The northernmost record of Great Kiskadee on eBird is just north of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where one was observed from 14 November 2015 to 1 January 2016. These extralimital birds were all present for a period ranging from approximately four weeks to well over a year.

As we know, the bird at Rondeau fits that pattern: it was seen regularly, but intermittently, from 7 September to 10 December 2018 (Dragon 2020). Interestingly, a bird was observed in north-eastern Indiana, a straight-line distance of about 400 km southwest of Rondeau, from 17 December 2018 to 13 January 2019. We may surmise that the Rondeau bird had finally had enough of Ontario's winter and decided to return towards warmer climes.

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P. Allen Woodliffe
30 Argyle Crescent
Chatham, Ontario N7L 4T8
E-mail: awoodliffe@hotmail.com