

## Gray Flycatcher: Third Record for Ontario

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### Introduction

The date 14 December 2003 is a day that is unlikely to fade in my memory. John Harvey, Richard Skevington (my father) and I started the Fisherville Christmas Bird Count (CBC) in our traditional area near Taquanyah, west of Cayuga, in the Regional Municipality of Haldimand, Ontario. The morning was overcast and winds were light from the southeast. Heavy snow throughout the morning made conditions for birding tough, but the birds made up for our misery. While walking through the marsh, my father yelled that he had a shorebird. When I arrived, I was very surprised to see a Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*). We suggested that it was time to hang up the bins and call it a day, as we could not expect to top such a bird.

Fortunately, we continued and at 1245h, we topped it. We had walked into a small wetland on the north side of Indiana Road West, 1.9 km west of River Road (42° 58' 46" N, 79° 54' 17" W), hoping to see the usual flock of American Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*) and perhaps a few Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) or the like. I went straight to the cattails and starting spishing, with Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) and Swamp

Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) on my mind. Dad yelled from where I had just walked and said that he had a flycatcher. I backtracked expecting to find an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) and was shocked to see an *Empidonax* flycatcher.

Excited expletives soon followed as I realized that the flycatcher was a western *Empidonax*! The long bill, long tail with extensive white edges on the outermost feathers, and general coloration immediately eliminated any eastern *Empidonax* species. We spent a minute yelling at John to come over, another minute or two uttering more expletives, and then a few minutes debating whether it was a Dusky (*E. oberholseri*) or Hammond's (*E. hammondi*). I thought at that point that it was a Dusky but some things were not adding up.

After a few minutes taking notes, I ran back to the car and grabbed Sibley (2000), my scope and my camera. A quick look in Sibley made me smack myself in the forehead. I had not even considered Gray Flycatcher (*E. wrightii*) because of the green back and yellowish breast and belly on our bird. All of the inconsistencies nagging me about Dusky Flycatcher now made sense. The bird was a Gray

Flycatcher, apparently in first winter (first basic) plumage. Even though I had lived in California for a year, I had not seen this plumage. Alternate-plumaged Gray Flycatchers that I was familiar with were very pale and much greyer overall than this bird. Now the phoebe-like tail bobbing made sense. I spent 30 minutes writing more notes on the bird and attempting my first digiscoped photos (thankfully not reproduced here).

Even though I was absolutely confident at this point that we were looking at Ontario's first winter record of Gray Flycatcher, we were nervous about whether or not others would agree with us. *Empidonax* identifications are notoriously difficult to make and I expected some flack over the next few days, particularly if the bird hung around.

The flack started as soon as expected. When we went to the count summary, people immediately suggested that we were looking at a phoebe and when shown the photos, most only allowed that it was an *Empidonax*. Only John Miles seemed to buy our identification, reiterating some of our earlier expletives as he looked at the pictures.

We posted the sighting on ONTBIRDS in the evening and the next day more flames started to appear as people questioned the identification. Fortunately, the flaming was short-lived, as Alan Wormington went and saw the bird on 15 December and later that day

posted a comment on ONTBIRDS that "identification of the bird as a Gray Flycatcher was exceptionally straightforward". The flycatcher was last reported on 7 January 2004, and was seen by hundreds of people, with no further dissention. The record has been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Crins 2004).

### Identification

So, what was the process that we went through to identify this bird? Most birders would immediately recognize the bird as an *Empidonax* flycatcher: a small, drab, warbler-sized passerine with two wing bars, a narrow eye ring and a narrow insectivorous bill. The assumption might be that it would be a Least Flycatcher, the latest *Empidonax* migrant and a species that might occur in December, but this would be exceptional too. We considered this briefly, but it was never a serious consideration. The most noticeable diagnostic features that we commented on immediately, and which differentiate it from other *Empidonax* species, were: tail regularly pumped/dipped, as in Eastern Phoebe; long narrow bill with black tip ventrally; narrow complete eye ring, with no flaring at the back of the eye; pronounced contrast between green back and grey head; white throat contrasting with pale yellow breast and belly; and the call, a "whit" similar to Least Flycatcher, but somewhat softer than that species. Alan Wormington

later reported (ONTBIRDS, 15 December 2003) that he heard the bird utter a “double note” vocalization once or twice that he described as “tsee-up”. This may be a partial song (see Peterjohn and Gustafson 1990, Sterling 1999, Sibley 2000).

The most striking character that eliminated all eastern species of *Empidonax* from consideration was the long, narrow, straight-sided bill, with a black ventral tip. Eastern species of *Empidonax*, and Cordilleran (*E. occidentalis*) and Pacific-slope (*E. difficilis*) Flycatchers, have broader, slightly convex bills. Patterns of the lower mandible are useful in differentiating *Empidonax* flycatchers. Three western species (Hammond’s, Dusky and Gray) are the only species with yellow lower mandibles with dark tips. The lower mandible is completely yellow in all others (although Least is variable and can show some dark below). The dark tip is most extensive in Hammond’s, covering over half of the mandible. The dark coloration is usually restricted to the tip in Dusky and Gray. The dark tip grades into the pale base in Dusky and Hammond’s, and contrasts sharply in Gray. Hammond’s Flycatcher has a distinctly shorter bill than Dusky and Gray. So, based only on the very distinctive bill shape and coloration, we are left considering only Dusky and Gray (and possibly Hammond’s if we have any doubts about bill length).

Call notes of *Empidonax* flycatchers are also usually distinctive,

and only four species have *whit* calls as given by this bird: Least, Willow (*E. traillii*), Dusky, and Gray. Hammond’s gives a sharp *peep*. That means we were clearly dealing with Dusky or Gray, after only a moment’s observation. The distinctive phoebe-like tail-dipping behaviour performed regularly is unique to Gray Flycatcher, and had I ignored plumage characteristics that I did not recognize, I should have realized that this was what it was immediately.

This is the short version of how the bird was diagnosed. However, because no single character should be used to make any identification, many more details were examined which confirmed the identification.

The behaviour of the bird was fairly distinctive; it always perched low and often flew down to take insects on or near the ground (although other species will do this in cold weather when insects are low). Interestingly, we noted that the bird was taking a lot of insects off the snow, and amazingly, out of the water. We saw it pick a caddisfly larva (Trichoptera) out of very shallow water at least twice.

The head is smoothly rounded in Least, Gray, Dusky and Yellow-bellied (*E. flaviventris*); very slightly crested in Hammond’s, Willow, Alder (*E. alnorum*) and Acadian (*E. virescens*); and moderately crested in Pacific-slope and Cordilleran. The eye ring is faint to nearly lacking on Willow, Alder and Acadian Flycatcher; conspicuous,



**Figure 1:** Gray Flycatcher near Cayuga, Regional Municipality of Haldimand, Ontario, on 15 December 2003, showing long narrow bill, round head, and pale yellow breast and belly. Photo by *Harold E. Stiver*.



**Figure 2:** Gray Flycatcher near Cayuga, Regional Municipality of Haldimand, Ontario, on 22 December 2003, showing green back and rump, short primary extension, and long tail with white on outer edges. Photo by *Jean H. Iron*.



**Figure 3: Gray Flycatcher near Cayuga, Regional Municipality of Haldimand, Ontario, on 1 January 2004. Photo by Kenneth M. Newcombe.**

slightly thinner above the eye and broader behind the eye in Hammond's, Cordilleran and Pacific-slope (Cordilleran and Pacific-slope are white or yellowish white, exaggerated into a point behind the eye); narrow and even in Yellow-bellied and Gray; variable in Least, but typically not as narrow as in Gray; and conspicuous and contrasting with the face in Least and Yellow-bellied, showing less contrast with the grey face in Gray. A pale area on the lores is present but variable in all species; however, it continues in a pale band across the forehead only in Gray.

Primary extension is short in Gray, Least, Dusky, Pacific-slope, Cordilleran and Yellow-bellied, and long in Hammond's, Acadian, Alder

and Willow. The tail is long in relation to length of the wingtips in Dusky, Gray, Cordilleran and Pacific-slope; moderate length in Least, Acadian, Alder and Willow; and short in Hammond's and Yellow-bellied. The tail is noticeably broader in Acadian, Willow and Alder.

Gray Flycatchers have obvious white outer edges on the tail. The white is brighter and more extensive than in any other *Empidonax*. This was distinctive on our bird and drew our attention immediately. Note that Kaufman (1990) warns that despite our experience, this character is difficult to assess in the field. Dusky is the next most likely species to show white on the outer tail feathers, but several species can give the impression of showing this

character, particularly when the tail is somewhat splayed (Paul E. Lehman, pers. comm.). Throat colour is yellow to greyish yellow in Pacific-slope, Cordilleran, Yellow-bellied and immature Acadian; white and contrasting with the face in Least, adult Acadian, and most Alders; and grey with no sharp contrast between the head and throat in Willow, some Alders, Hammond's, Dusky and Gray (very pale grey to nearly white, but no sharp contrast between throat and sides of head). This was the only character that we observed that did not match perfectly with Gray Flycatcher. We noted a white throat contrasting with sides of the head. I assume that the contrast was emphasized due to a recent molt, as the bird appeared to be in very

fresh plumage.

Colour of the back and contrast with the head varies depending on the plumage. In December, Dusky, Hammond's, Gray and some Least Flycatchers should have extensive contrast between the head and back (greenish back and greyish head). There is little contrast in some Least, Alder and Willow (uniform olive-brown), Cordilleran and Pacific-slope (olive-green washed with brown) and Yellow-bellied and Acadian (green).

Wing bars and tertial edgings contrast strongly with blackish wings in Least, Yellow-bellied, Acadian, and to a lesser extent in Willow and Alder; in western species, the wings are greyish and so show less contrast, with the least contrast shown in Gray. Buffy wing bars in December

**Table 1. Accepted and pending Gray Flycatcher records in eastern North America.**

Province/State	Location	Observer(s)	Date(s)
Massachusetts	Littleton	James Baird	31 October 1969 (collected)
Ontario	Mugg's Island, Toronto	David Broughton, Ross D. James	11 September 1981
Ohio	Magee Marsh Wildlife Management Area, Lucas County	Bruce G. Peterjohn, Mary E. Gustafson, Ray Hannikman, Larry Rosche	20 to 22 August 1988
Delaware	Cape Henlopen State Park	W. French, B. Fintel, B. Murphy, N. Murphy, Jon L. Dunn, et al.	6 November through December 1991
Ontario	Point Pelee National Park	Alan Wormington	7 June 1993
Ontario	Near Cayuga, Haldimand Regional Municipality	Jeffrey H. Skevington, Richard P. Skevington, John Harvey, et al.	14 December 2003 to 7 January 2004
North Carolina	Hank's Chapel, near Jordan Lake, Chatham County	Josh Rose, Bill Lupardus, Glenn Simon, Deb Carter, et al.	28 December 2003 to 19 January 2004

occur in all plumages of Hammond's, Dusky, Acadian and in immature Least, Pacific-slope, Cordilleran, Yellow-bellied, Willow and Alder. In Gray Flycatcher, wing bars and tertial edges are whitish. Pacific-slope and Cordilleran wings are dusky with dull white wing bars. Adult Alder and Willow may have white wing bars and tertials in December if they have not recently completed their molt.

Molt pattern and timing is an important part of identifying *Empidonax* species. Our bird appeared to be an immature in relatively fresh, first basic plumage (in adult plumage, yellow areas will fade/wear to whitish, and green will fade to grey; wing bars will fade towards white and become narrower; sharply pointed rectrices will become more rounded). For more discussion of molt in *Empidonax* species, see Kaufman (1990), Pyle (1997), and Sterling (1999).

### **Extralimital Records in Eastern North America**

Gray Flycatcher is an extremely rare bird in eastern North America at any time, and seemed even more unlikely in the winter. To put this into perspective, Alan Wormington stated on ONTBIRDS (15 December 2003): "On the long drive home today, I contemplated if any other CBC observation was as outlandish as this bird found by the Skevingtons. The only one I could think of was Phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*), but I couldn't

decide which of these two CBC birds is more remarkable".

There are two previous records of Gray Flycatcher for Ontario. The first occurrence was on 11 September 1981 at Mugg's Island, Toronto, involving a bird netted and banded by David Broughton, and later examined and photographed by Ross D. James. The photographs, detailed documentation of colours and measurements, and an outer tail feather are filed at the Royal Ontario Museum (James 1982, Pittaway 1995). Alan Wormington recorded the second Ontario observation on 7 June 1993 at Point Pelee National Park, Essex County (Bain 1994), on a day of heavy *Empidonax* migration when a record count of 68 Yellow-bellied Flycatchers was tallied (Ridout 1993).

I am aware of only four other records of Gray Flycatcher in eastern North America (see Table 1), involving observations in Delaware (Paxton et al. 1992, Boyle et al. 1992), Massachusetts (Finch 1970, Veit and Petersen 1993), North Carolina (Paul E. Lehman, pers. comm.), and Ohio (Peterjohn and Gustafson 1990). The most interesting of these was the bird discovered on the Jordan Lake CBC in North Carolina, and seen from 28 December 2003 to 19 January 2004. This observation has yet to be reviewed by the state records committee, but photos on the web (<http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/pix/grayflycatcher.html>) are convincing. This bird coincided well with

our record and perhaps arrived with the same weather system. Given that two records occurred almost simultaneously, it may be that this species occurs more often than we expect in the east and is under-recorded. Perhaps not, but given that ours is the third record for Ontario, it suggests that this is a species for which we should all be on the lookout.

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