

Acadian Flycatchers Nesting on Martha's Vineyard, Dukes County

Matthew L. Pelikan

The history of the Acadian Flycatcher on Martha's Vineyard is a short one, at least as far as human observers know. Griscom and Emerson (1959) don't mention this species at all. Whiting and Pesche (1983) consider Acadian Flycatcher to be a "rare transient" on New England's largest island, citing only three records: June 23, 1962 (an intriguingly late date even for this generally late migrant); September 8, 1976; and June 4, 1978. More recently, Laux (1999) lists the species as a breeding bird on the Vineyard, although the publication referenced is better viewed as a popular (not ornithological) bird book, and Laux's assessment (while no doubt accurate) was based on circumstantial evidence of breeding by this species (V. Laux, pers. comm.).

In recent years, after decades of gradual expansion into the Northeast, Acadian Flycatchers have been summer residents on the Vineyard in small numbers, with a regularity suggestive of breeding. Most recently, one or two pairs have been present for each summer at least since 1997 at Waskosim's Rock Reservation, a property straddling the West Tisbury/Chilmark town line and owned by the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank, in wet deciduous woodland along the upper reaches of the Mill Brook. The deciduous forest in this area consists largely of oak and beech, with a dense and fairly diverse shrub understory. Acadian Flycatchers have also been noted during the summer in recent years in Aquinnah (formerly Gay Head, V. Laux, pers. comm.). Beyond the circumstantial evidence of summering birds, however, irrefutable proof of breeding by this species on the Vineyard has so far eluded birders. So the discovery of two active nests of this species in June 2000 represents a significant development in the history of the Acadian Flycatcher in Dukes County, even as it fills in the pattern of expansion displayed by this species in the region.

In 2000, Acadian Flycatchers were first noted at Waskosim's Rock Reservation by Tom Rivers, in early June. On June 11, I visited Waskosim's and found two pairs of flycatchers, with at least one bird singing in each pair and two birds visible simultaneously in each case. One pair was close to the brook, in a beech grove; the other was in a somewhat more densely and variously vegetated area along a muddy slough, about 200 meters west of the first pair and about 50 meters south of the brook. No nest or other direct evidence of nesting was observed on this occasion.

On June 20, accompanied by Greg Levandoski, I visited Waskosim's Rock. We found only the male, singing fairly actively, at the site of the second pair near the slough; no second bird was seen or heard in about twenty minutes of observation. At the site of the first pair in the beech grove, two birds were apparent, at least one foraging and singing intermittently, and both birds calling. Levandoski reached overhead to pull down for a closer look a twig with what appeared to be an old nest on it. But seen more closely, the nest proved to be a fresh one containing three eggs.

The nest was small (not much over three inches in outside diameter) and shallow, with the main structure apparently made entirely of tendrils, as from grape vines or greenbrier (the nest was collected during a visit to the location in December 2000; see Figure 1). There was no lining, and construction of the nest was loose, so that the outline of the eggs could be dimly seen from underneath. However, the stiff material seemed to give the nest quite a bit of rigidity. A few strands of softer material were hung from the outside of the nest. The nest was built in the fork of an oak twig that



Figure 1: Acadian Flycatcher nest, collected in West Tisbury, MA, by the author in December 2000

had fallen and become caught in a horizontal fork of a low-hanging beech branch. A clump of dried oak leaves containing a few dried catkins was attached to the oak twig right next to the nest, so that the entire assembly could easily be overlooked as just a clump of dried leaves that had been caught on their way to the ground. The nest was placed about seven feet off the ground when the branch was at rest, directly over the trail and about five meters from the edge of the stream.

The eggs, about three-quarters of an inch long and ovoid, were a creamy

white with a few large, irregular, dark brown spots.

On July 3, Levandoski returned to the beech grove nest site and observed the nest through a spotting scope from about 25 meters away. Three young, showing partially grown feathers (including wing bars) were visible in the nest, and adult birds were observed making about ten trips (averaging about one per minute) to the nest, delivering insects. It appeared that additional material — apparently dried catkins of some kind — had been added to the nest, increasing its bulk somewhat.

On July 5, we visited the area again, stopping first near the territory of the flycatchers for which we had not yet found conclusive evidence of breeding. Observing both adult flycatchers, we searched carefully in the area that appeared to be near the center of their movements. Within a few minutes, Levandoski spotted a nest, generally similar in construction and positioning to the nest previously observed. It was situated in a horizontal fork near the end of a beech branch, five or six meters off the ground and about seven meters from the edge of the standing water in the slough. The nest was vacant at the time, and although its construction was quite loose, we were unable to tell for certain from underneath whether it contained any eggs or nestlings. We noted the location, and while on the way back to the car (about a half-hour later), observed it through a spotting scope from about forty meters away. The nest was occupied by an adult Acadian Flycatcher, which we assumed to be the female because a second bird could be heard singing nearby. It is interesting that we also noted a Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest and an Ovenbird nest within a just a few meters of the flycatcher nest site, and observed a female American Redstart

ransacking what appeared to be an old Red-eyed Vireo nest for fibers. On June 20, Levandoski had observed a White-breasted Nuthatch feeding a fledgling here. A busy corner of the woods!

A few days later, Levandoski visited the first nest again, finding it empty but apparently undisturbed; there was no indication of predation, and it appeared likely that the young had fledged.

Expansion into the Bay State

Confirmation of nesting by this species on the Vineyard was surely overdue, but it fits neatly into the pattern of expansion of this species in southern New England. Whether an 1888 nest in Hyde Park reflected a vestige of a pre-agrarian past, a bold attempt at colonization, or just an aberration cannot be determined, but in any case it marked the last known evidence of Acadians in the Bay State until 1961, when a rapidly accelerating pattern of singing, banded, or collected birds in the eastern part of the state (especially along the coast) commenced (Veit and Petersen 1993). In 1977, an Acadian Flycatcher nest was observed in a tupelo tree in Middleboro (Petersen 1977) for the first Massachusetts nesting record in nearly a century. By 1980, the species was apparently breeding in modest numbers in the Connecticut River Valley and around the Quabbin Reservoir. Isolated instances of nesting have subsequently been confirmed in Plymouth and Scituate, and in Savoy, in Berkshire County (Veit and Petersen 1993).

The northward expansion of the species continued. On May 31, 1998, three days after a returning bird was noted on Martha's Vineyard, an Acadian Flycatcher was found in Pawtuckaway State Park, in Nottingham, in southeastern New Hampshire (Perkins 1998). Later in the summer, New Hampshire's first nest was discovered here (Petersen 1998), and Acadians nested again at this location in 1999 and 2000. Meanwhile, a few individuals were noted in Maine, e.g., three banded on Appledore Island in York, Maine, in May 1998 (Perkins 1998), and one "seen and heard" on May 12, 2000, in Portland, according to the BIRDEAST Internet transcription of the Maine Rare Bird Alert.

This pattern of expansion seems consistent with the hypothesis put forth in Petersen (1977), that the Massachusetts breeders likely originated with "the coastal plain population existing south of New York . . . which [] gradually colonized Long Island, Connecticut, and Rhode Island" during the late 1960s and 1970s. The species appears to have progressed by establishing outposts along the coastal plain and along a corridor of presumably suitable habitat roughly along the Connecticut River Valley. The Acadian Flycatchers on Martha's Vineyard represent the easternmost of the southern New England nesting records. While it is possible that Acadian Flycatchers have extended to the northernmost limit they can successfully inhabit in the East, further expansion also seems very possible, and birders remain alert for nesting locations that augment the existing corridors, for breeding birds filling in the indentations in the northern margin of the species' range, and for increasing numbers of territories in areas already colonized.

The Acadian Flycatcher prefers wet woodland for nesting, but while it uses a huge range of such woodlands across its breeding range, this bird often displays specific preferences within a particular region. The most striking illustration of this comes from the habits of the Acadian Flycatchers nesting around the Quabbin Reservoir, in central Massachusetts. Repudiating the general preference of the species for deciduous woodland, the Quabbin birds appear to be closely associated with hemlock trees. In a study conducted for the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge (Lyons and Livingston 1997), researchers checked twenty-two drainages containing hemlock cover for Acadian Flycatchers, finding an estimated total of fourteen territories in eight drainages. Nests, invariably in a hemlock tree and near or over open water, were found in eleven territories. "Recent observations of [Acadian Flycatchers] on Quabbin have suggested that the species is using hemlock stream valleys almost exclusively" during the breeding season, Lyons and Livingston remark. The 1997 nest in Middleboro was found in another kind of habitat, similar to the Quabbin hemlock ravines in general topography but differing in vegetation: "The habitat was a wooded glen, watered with a small brook and overgrown with maples, ash, tupelo, American holly, locust, and a variety of smaller shrubs" (Petersen 1977). The nest itself was built in a horizontal fork in a lower limb of a tupelo tree, by all accounts a typical placement for this species.

The Vineyard Acadian Flycatchers picked nest sites once again involving steep banks and running water, but the oak/beech woodland represents yet another floral mix frequented by this bird in Massachusetts. The common topographical elements in all three cases may provide useful hints on where to look for nesting Acadian Flycatchers in southern New England. It is worth noting, however, that in other parts of its range this species happily occupies habitats with still rather than running water (e.g., cypress bays, rhododendron thickets, black ash swamps, or tamarack swamps), and the species may occur in areas with dense or with very little understory (Christy 1942). So any wet habitats occurring in extensive tracts, such as red maple swamps, might be worth keeping in mind as possible nesting habitat for Acadian Flycatchers in

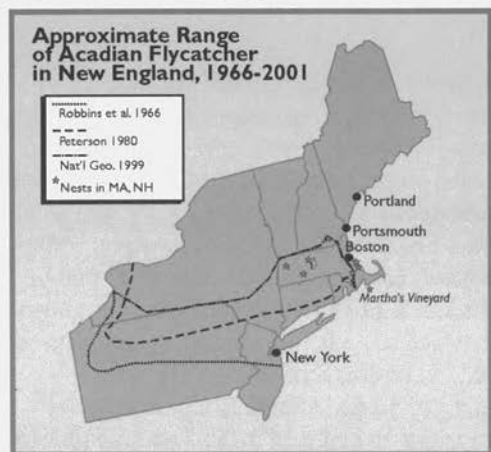



Figure 2: Distribution of Acadian Flycatchers — map by the author

Massachusetts. Locations like Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge in Harvard, Estabrook Woods in Concord (see *Bird Observer* 27: 124-132 for Ron Lockwood's excellent article on this under-birded location), and Great Brook State Park in Carlisle have impressed me as possible locations for this flycatcher, given its habitat preferences and current distribution; any wooded stream bed in Essex County could also furnish the next Bay State nesting location for Acadian Flycatcher.

Whether the Acadian Flycatcher is expanding into New England for the

first time, or whether this species inhabited the region prior to European colonization and was then extirpated as a result of agricultural land-clearing, may never be determined. And of course it is equally hard to predict the eventual outcome of the species' current push into the Northeast. But over the last half-century or so, this modest bird has staged one of the most striking examples I can recall of range expansion by a native bird species (Figure 2 illustrates this process by showing the breeding range attributed to this species in three field guides published over the last thirty-five years). I hope this range expansion is permanent: with its distinctive vocalizations and secretive, rather vireo-like habits, the Acadian Flycatcher is a fascinating addition to the region's woodland avifauna. 

References

- Christy, B.H. 1942. Acadian Flycatcher. In *Life Histories of North American Flycatchers, Larks, Swallows, and Their Allies*, by A.C. Bent. Washington, D.C.: United States National Museum Bulletin 179. (Repr. Dover, 1963).
- Griscom, L., and G. Emerson. 1959. *Birds of Martha's Vineyard*. Martha's Vineyard: privately printed.
- Laux, E.V. 1999. *Bird News: Vagrants and Visitors on a Peculiar Island*. New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows.
- Lyons, P.J., and J.E. Livingston. 1997. *Identification and Characterization of Acadian Flycatcher Breeding Habitat on Quabbin Reservation*. Unpublished report prepared for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.
- National Geographic Society. 1999. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America (Third Edition)*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.
- Perkins, S. 1998. New England Region. *Field Notes* 52: 303-307.
- Petersen, W.R. 1977. A Breeding Record for the Acadian Flycatcher in Massachusetts. *Bird Observer* 5: 162-164.
- Petersen, W.R. 1998. New England Region. *Field Notes* 52: 434-437.
- Peterson, R.T. 1980. *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Robbins, C.S., B. Bruun, and H.S. Zim. 1966. *Birds of North America*. New York: Golden Press.
- Whiting, S.B., and B.B. Pesch. 1983. *Vineyard Birds*. Lincoln, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Audubon Society.
- Veit, R.R., and W. R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Lincoln, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Matthew L. Pelikan has lived in Oak Bluffs, on Martha's Vineyard, since August 1997. He works as an editor for the American Birding Association and as a freelance writer, and has served as editor and subscription manager for Bird Observer.