

THE NOVEMBER FLYCATCHER

The report reached birding circles up and down the East Coast, a "Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher" (Myiodynastes luteiventris) had been spotted at Biddeford Pool, Maine. Amazing! From near and far we went to look at a bird that most of us had never seen or had little familiarity with. The reports continued; more of us went and came back with a new check mark.

The flycatcher was last seen on November 11, 1977. The photographs were still in the cameras of those lucky enough to get a picture. On the last days of the bird's visit at Biddeford, dissention began to surface--was this actually a Sulphur-bellied? Davis W. Finch, the former North-eastern Maritime Region editor for American Birds, first decided that the bird was not a Sulphur-bellied but probably a Variegated Flycatcher (Empidonomus varius). It should also be noted that the bird was also thought to be a Streaked Flycatcher (Myiodynastes maculatus).

Finch had a direct comparison of the bird and a Western Kingbird (Tyrannus verticalis) and noted immediately its smaller-appearing size. Both the Sulphur-bellied and Streaked Flycatchers are about the same size as the Western Kingbird. The Variegated Flycatcher is much smaller, however, and its bill is considerably thinner than the heavy broad bill of the Sulphur-bellied and Streaked Flycatchers.

Furthermore, the Variegated Flycatcher ranges from Columbia, south to Paraguay and Argentina, and its southern race migrates north during the winter, which, perhaps, could explain its wandering as far north as Biddeford Pool. Other species of South America have similar migratory habits, such as the Fork-tailed Flycatcher (Muscivora tyrannus), which has been recorded several times in the northeast, including Biddeford Pool.

In retrospect, the bird should have been captured for positive identification--or even collected if necessary. Unfortunately, birders should probably erase their check mark for this enigma. Yet, the November flycatcher has reaffirmed an important precept--even local experts can be baffled and unsure about a rare vagrant.

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